



Forty Leap
Ivan Turner

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Forty Leap is a novel that I have made available for purchase on smashwords.com and in the Kindle store. This sample is the first 4 chapters of the book, offered so that my feedbooks readers can dive in and decide whether or not it's worth the price of admission. If you've read and enjoyed my other publications on feedbooks then you should also enjoy Forty Leap.

As always, I thank you for your support and continued interest in my books.

Chapter 1

My name is Mathew Cristian. I can't really put a "how long ago" stamp on the story I'm about to tell because the date that it started doesn't correspond with the time it took to reach its conclusion. A moment for me was mostly a moment. But sometimes it was much more. Sometimes it was a lifetime.

I was thirty four years old when all of this started, or at least when I noticed it. It was a Thursday. I was a regular guy. Actually, I was so regular that I was irregular. I got up every morning, went to work, went home, went to bed, and repeated the process the next day. In between I ate meals, spoke with family, had many *many* boring weekends, and that's it. I was a confirmed bachelor, not out of any sense of not wanting companionship, but because marriage seemed so out of reach to me that I just never even considered it.

My adventure started in the most simple of all ways. It's something that happens to everyone. Your alarm goes off in the morning. Let's say it's six o'clock. You turn it off and lay back down, just for a second. You *don't* fall asleep and you're just laying there for a second or two. Then you look back at the clock and it's 6:02 or 6:03. What happened to those two or three minutes? Who knows? Your mind wandered and your whole sense of time became confused for just a couple of minutes. It happens to everyone.

Unless you're me.

Unless it wasn't just your *sense* of time that became confused but something far more fundamental.

The first time it happened to me, I didn't even notice it. I'm sure of it. It was probably just a couple of seconds or less. I lost them. Whoosh! They were just gone.

The first time I noticed it was a whole different matter. On that Thursday. April 12, 2007.

For one thing, I wasn't in bed. When you're in bed and sleepy, things just kind of slip by you. That wasn't the case here. I was pouring myself a cup of coffee. It was 6:42 in the morning. No sooner had I tipped the

pot then I noticed coffee all over the counter and all over the floor. The pot in my hand, still tipped, was empty. It was 6:43. You don't think too hard about the ramifications of such an event when there's hot coffee everywhere and you've got to get to work. You just kind of put the pot back into the machine, grab a bunch of paper towels, and start mopping. Later on, though, the whole of it can begin to dominate your thoughts, as it did mine. I began to wonder about what had happened. How long does it take to empty a pot of coffee? I can understand something like that happening if my mind began to wander, but I couldn't remember anything. Not reality and not fantasy. I remember tipping the pot and I remember cleaning up the mess.

I lost a minute.

I have, *had*, two brothers. They are, *were*, both older than I was, or I should say they were born before I was, and they were very close to each other. Living in the city, I didn't get out to see them often. They were about two hours through New Jersey and into Upstate New York. It wasn't a bad trip, really. I used to take the bus because I didn't have a car. The tickets were inexpensive and one of my brothers, usually Jeremy, always picked me up at the depot. We weren't friends, we were family. And we all knew that family sticks together. I enjoyed my afternoons with my brothers and their families. It gave me a sense of something I had never had for myself.

About three weeks after the first incident, on a Sunday, I took one of my day trips up to Jeremy's for an afternoon with the family. Though our mother usually accompanied me on these trips, she had been feeling a little out of sorts that day so she had sent me off on my own. That was fine with me. My relationship with my mother was excellent. We often got together to have dinner or watch a movie or just discuss the world affairs. Being the only one of her sons living in the city, responsibility for her had fallen to me, but that was okay, too. Once in a while, though, it's nice to have two hours to yourself just to read. For that trip, I had chosen a Rupert Oderick novel, his first, entitled *Midshipmen*. I had read and enjoyed it in high school.

It was Wyatt who picked me up at the station that day. I don't know why I remember it so well or even why it's relevant to these pages, but details are important so I'll write the ones I remember. Wyatt was 18 months younger than Jeremy, to the day, and he was four years my senior. I suppose that growing up with them could have been a lot worse. After all, they had had four good years together, learning to work as a team and then I came along, a tiny invader into their lives. They could

have spent our years together at home torturing me into a psychiatrist's couch, but they didn't. In truth, they spent most of their time avoiding me, excluding me. It hurt when I was younger, but as I grew up, I began to realize that we had little in common. It wasn't that they didn't love me. They just didn't want to play with me.

Wyatt had his son with him that day. My nephew, Devin, was a sandy haired boy who looked a lot like his mom. In fact, he bore little resemblance to his dad's square shoulders and boyish face. Devin, in fact, looked much older than his six years. He was a spectacular conversationalist and played Jeremy to a standstill in Chess. But he had little use for me and he sat in the back seat glaring at me through the mirror. He didn't dislike me as much as he was just uncomfortable in my presence. Despite his intelligence and his mannerisms, he was just a child and children grow awkward when they are unsure of their situations. I guess I made him nervous.

The day at Jeremy's was very much like other days. Sunday is a day of bad movies or sports, even when there's no football. It was late April and Jeremy was flipping through four baseball games. Wyatt paid little attention to the television. He sat, instead, with Olivia, Jeremy's daughter, playing Boggle or Scrabble. They were both avid readers and true competitors. The outcomes of their games were rarely determined until very late and Livvie, almost fifteen years old, won often. Every once in a while, she would flash me a smile just to remind me that she knew I was part of the family even if I didn't like sports or Scrabble and no one seemed to want to talk to me. Livvie loved me genuinely, like a niece is supposed to love her uncle and I was grateful for it.

Her mother, on the other hand, had hated me from the minute she set eyes upon me. Martha, Martie to her friends and family (and even me), was a self absorbed, self deprecating kind of person. I never quite understood what Jeremy saw in her but I think it had to do with his compulsive tendency to try and save the world. Martie's attitude toward life and herself had always prevented her from truly succeeding. She had dropped out of college twice and never held a job for any length of time. In fact, her only success was her marriage and family, which was questionable in the case of my oldest nephew, Jack, who I rarely saw. I guess Martie thought I was creepy. When Jeremy introduced us, I was a high school junior with no friends and a propensity for staying home on Friday and Saturday nights. I spent a lot of time on the computer, playing and writing text adventures. I was shy and quiet and I suppose that the curious way I looked at her made her uncomfortable.

Wyatt's wife, on the other hand, was a lovely and successful woman with the unusual name of Attenda. She had completed a Masters Degree and chosen to work with autistic children. Many people brought their children to Attenda for an early diagnosis and intervention. Though it was heartbreaking to see these children suffering, her techniques had provided many of them with levels of socialization and an outlook they might not otherwise have had. I liked and respected Attenda very much despite the fact that, even with all of her wonderful qualities, she also had little use for me.

At about a quarter to two, Martie came out of the kitchen with an arm load of finger foods and cursed because she had forgotten her tea. Since I was closest to the kitchen, I stood and volunteered to go get it. I could see the stricken look on Martie's face, but I couldn't say whether it was because she didn't want any favors from me or because she didn't want me that close to something she was going to ingest. Either way, Jeremy was thanking me before she could protest so off I went into the kitchen. The tea was sitting in a steaming mug on top of the counter. I went straight to it, picked it up and walked straight back out into the living room.

"Jeez, Mathew, did you get lost?" Jeremy asked.

"What?"

They were all looking at me now and Livvie said, "You were gone like five minutes, Uncle Mathew."

"I went straight in and came straight out," I protested. "If I had taken that long, the tea wouldn't still be this hot."

And it was true that steam still rose from the cup. And through that steam, I could see that the clock read 1:55 pm.

"No big deal, Mathew," Jeremy told me, seeing that I was becoming upset. He came over and took the tea from me, knowing that Martie certainly wouldn't. Nor did she drink it, I might add. But it was a big deal. It was a very big deal. It brought back the coffee incident of three weeks earlier. I had dismissed that as early morning fatigue, daydreaming, whatever I could lay my brain on, but the flimsy excuses crumbled in the wake of this new incident.

On the way back to the bus terminal that evening, I confided in Jeremy. He was silent while I told him and silent for a few minutes afterward. I think he was trying to gauge whether his brother was sick or just cracking up. He would never have accused me of lying because lying just wasn't something I did and I'm not an attention grabber. Let someone else have the spotlight. In the end, what could he say?

"Maybe you should see a doctor?"

I nodded, more to myself than to him.

"I mean," he continued. "If you're having blackouts, that could be serious. Grandpa's sister Eloise used to have blackouts, remember?"

I didn't.

"Well we never met her, but she died not too long before I was born so it was still fresh in everyone's memory when Mom and Dad told stories around the kitchen table that I could understand..."

He went on, as Jeremy had a tendency to do, and I listened attentively. The most relevant portion of the story was that our Great Aunt Eloise had blackouts and drove herself into the trees on a frosty February day. What Jeremy didn't say (or didn't know) was that Great Aunt Eloise had discovered acid and cocaine in her declining years and they made short work of her. This last bit I found out from my mother at a later date.

In the end, though, I decided that it was in my best interest to consult a physician. Blackouts are no laughing matter, especially when they are not caused by narcotics. I was beginning to scare.

My regular doctor could see no reason for the sudden blackouts, but he decided to err on the side of caution and sent me for some tests. On May 2nd, about a week and a half after my visit with my brothers, I went to a big hospital in Manhattan, where I was given a hospital gown in a baggie and ushered into a small changing room. I had no sooner put the baggie on the bench and begun to unbutton my shirt when there was a knock on the door. Still fully dressed, I turned and opened it, peeking out.

"Aren't you changed yet?" the nurse said.

I looked at her quizzically. I thought she was joking. "You only left a moment ago."

"Oh," she said. "Oh, dear." Then she closed the door and left.

It took me a moment, but I realized that I'd had another blackout. I checked my watch and it was a little past a quarter past noon, but since I hadn't checked it before I came in, there was no way for me to know how long I'd been out. At that moment, I decided to always be aware of the time.

The tests showed nothing, though the doctor confirmed a more than twenty minute time lapse between the nurse showing me the dressing room and then coming in to check on me. Twenty minutes is a long blackout. It appeared they were beginning to grow in duration and I could see that these types of long blackouts could severely impair my

life, such as it was. Over the course of a week, I went back for more tests, but the doctors could find no physical reason for my blackouts (and I had no more in that time). In the interim, my mother became ill and I was forced to juggle my job with handling her affairs and hospital visits for tests. This created incredible demands on my time and made life extremely difficult. It wasn't so much that I was stretched too thin. I could always find time for things, but I had no time to simply relax. I was working and then going to the hospital after work and visiting my mother after the hospital. Couple all of that with the looming possibility of another, longer blackout and I began to feel and react to a tremendous amount of stress.

At one point, I got into an argument with one of my co-workers. To begin with, I never got into arguments with anyone. There was a situation once, when I first started working with the company, where a co-worker, Denise something or other, was stealing things from my desk. It wasn't much, just little things, but it was done in the spirit of antagonism. She was just a mean old lady, a couple of years from retirement and she had chosen me as a victim because she had pegged me as someone who would not fight back. And she was right. I endured her torture for two years until the day of her retirement. On her last day, she dumped a box of my stuff (pens, pencils, some loose change, some really old chocolate bars, etc...) onto my desk and thanked me for entertaining her for the last two years of her career.

The doctors now suggested I see a psychiatrist.

Well, I did just that. I couldn't afford not to get the root of the problem. Even a man who does and has nothing feels that his life and his time are important. As did I.

We tried several things, the psychiatrist and I. We tried to find a pattern among my blackouts. Maybe they were caused by stress, maybe by some combination of the foods I was eating, the television I was watching, the radio to which I listened. Eventually, we tried hypnotherapy, but it was too difficult to focus in on periods of such a short time. Even a twenty minute period was difficult, but it was where we had the most success. The doctor actually regressed me to my visit to the hospital, had me accept the baggie, had me walk into the dressing room, had me place the baggie on the bench, and then (*poof!*) the nurse knocks on the door and I answer it. There was no gap between the two events, just as it had appeared to me at the time. Somehow, I had lost twenty minutes and my subconscious hadn't even bothered to take note of it.

Spooky.

Going back to the argument with the co-worker. His name was Ralph Tennest. It was a Monday, which was bad enough. My weekends were generally choked with catch-up work concerning my mother's affairs. Mondays at work were hard and stressful. I had a hospital appointment that evening, which was a constant source of aggravation. Afterwards, I would have to head to my mother's apartment and see to a left over piece of business that I couldn't manage the day before. At around 11:00 pm that night, I would wander home and collapse into bed only to have to get up several hours later and go to work again. The chaos of my life was beginning to close in around me.

Ralph was a decent guy, not particularly friendly, but with a good enough head on his shoulders and a kindness that was deeper than the exterior. He and I rarely spoke as I rarely spoke with anyone, but I didn't dislike him and I don't believe he disliked me. It was getting on toward the end of the day and I had been finding the ends of work days to be the most stressful times of day. Work itself was constant and regimented. It provided comfort where the rest of my life caused discontinuity and discontent. As work came to an end and I knew I would have to face the rest of my responsibilities, I would become increasingly irritable. I knew this about myself, even then, but that didn't help me to control it. Ralph, walking past, stumbled over a lip in the carpet and knocked against the cubicle. I had a picture of my brothers and their families in a small frame leaning up against the cubicle wall and it was knocked aside and fell to the carpet. It didn't break. It was no big deal. Ralph even grunted an apology. But I snapped at him anyway. I can't even write the words I said because I don't remember them (which is uncharacteristic for me), but I do remember the look on his face. It was this morphing expression that was born as shock, first from the insult itself and then from the source. Finally, it turned to anger, to which I responded with anger. We exchanged words, drawing the attention of some of the other people around. Eventually, though, he simply dismissed me and walked away, grumbling about how I choose to use my words. It was ultimately humiliating and I could feel my cheeks redden and my blood boiling. I sat like a statue until the last of my colleagues had looked away and then I bent down to pick up the picture.

It was no big deal. I was already more calm by the time I had straightened up and replaced the picture. The office had become eerily quiet and I stretched up to peer over the sides of my cubicle. The place was deserted.

In a panic, I sat down heavily and looked at the clock. It was 7:21 pm. I'd lost three hours. Three hours of my life was gone.

"Mathew?"

I turned quickly to see my boss standing beside me, a file folder in her hand, a look of confusion on her face.

"I thought you'd gone," she said.

"I...no..." How could she not see the utter confusion mirrored on my face? How could she not know?

"Well, we all thought you'd taken off after your argument with Ralph."

No, I was just blacked out under my desk for three hours. "No. It was my fault anyway. I should apologize to him."

She didn't seem to care. She was the type of woman who had worked her way up the corporate ladder with spit and venom. She treated her superiors the same exact way as she treated her underlings. It wasn't exactly unfriendly, but it wasn't exactly friendly either. She was on a first name basis with everyone and if you did your job the way you were supposed to do your job she left you alone. If you didn't, she swept you out of the way. I think I was just the type of employee she loved. I did my job and asked for nothing. I don't know whether or not it impressed her that I was at work two hours after I was supposed to have left, but she said nothing and walked away.

I hastily gathered my things and left in the twilight of a May evening. I was already an hour late for my hospital appointment so I decided to skip it. I called to tell them what had happened and they seemed unconcerned. I didn't speak to any doctors, or even any technicians. The fact that I was missing the appointment because of the very thing that caused me to have the appointments in the first place didn't interest them. And that was the end of my hospital visits. Just like that.

Grabbing a quick dinner, I hurried it over to my mother's apartment. She was glad that I had come early and we spent a couple of hours talking and watching television after I finished up the paperwork. If you've never had to take care of a sick parent, count your blessings. There were times when I felt myself resenting her, even wishing she would just die already. But those were selfish moments for which I paid the dear price of self recrimination. In truth, she was an extremely important part of my life that I dared not lose.

With the three hour blackout weighing heavily upon my thoughts, I began keeping a log in a paper notebook which I kept on my person at all times. Every time I would notice lost time, I decided I would record

it. I shared this with the psychiatrist, but it didn't help her to discover the cause of my problem at all.

The next three weeks passed without incident. At least, without the incident of a blackout. On May 19th, I received a call at work that my mother had been rushed to the hospital by ambulance and was forced to leave right away. Ironically, they took her to the same hospital where I'd taken all of those meaningless tests. By the time I arrived, the doctors already had her in stable condition and were telling me that she would be fine, or at least as fine as she had been the day before.

Sobbing, I called Jeremy and told him what had happened. Whether he cared less or he was just so stunned by the fact that I was crying, he took the news emotionlessly. The conversation was clipped and short until he asked, quite politely, if there was anything I needed from him or Wyatt. That was the way it was with the two of them. They were free to speak for each other at any time. I suppose he didn't expect me to accept his offer. I never did. After all of those years, I knew that they preferred their separation from the family. But I was on the verge of truly breaking down and I not only accepted his offer, I begged him for help. Even without the after-work hospital visits, I was truly at the end of my rope. I could feel the layers peeling off of my psyche and my psychiatrist, as good as she was, was not helping. The futility of those visits just made things even worse.

I went home that evening, drew the shades, turned on the television, and prayed that I would get no phone calls. A news magazine show was running a story on the new face of the Arab Nation. Normally, I am not a political animal, but just this once I thought it might be a good idea to see that the problems of the world were greater than my own. A man by the name of Abdelaziz had formed what he was calling the United Arab Nation. Through tremendous charisma and knowledge of his people and their religious beliefs, he had been sweeping through Middle Eastern countries and uniting their governments against Muslim terrorism. In the space of a few short months, he had made great strides toward accomplishing what America had not. And he was very vocal and very public about it. The show was focusing on the world's view of Abdelaziz and his Nation. Many people glorified the man. They were ready to give him a Nobel Peace Prize. But there were those that were afraid. Continued presence in the Middle East by a growing population of United States troops was creating more and more anti-American sentiment throughout the world. Though Abdelaziz himself never spoke of America in anything but a neutral manner, there was fear that he would

simply turn on us when he had the support of the rest of the world and crush our way of life.

It all seemed very large and unlikely to me, if not a little surreal. I had never been able to conceive of the *One-Man-Can-Change-The-World* theory despite history's teachings. For me the idea of stepping up and taking charge of anything was completely alien.

I must have dozed off shortly into the program because I came to with a start with little memory of anything but a series of introductory clips. There was something completely different on the television and the clock read 8:56. Rubbing my eyes, I got out of the chair and went into the bathroom to wash up. As I turned off the water, I heard the phone and silently pleaded for peace.

"Hello?"

"Mathew?" It was my boss.

"Yes?"

"Are you sick?"

That was an odd question. "No."

"It's after nine."

Some extra sense put me on my guard. From the living room, I could hear the television spitting out the traffic report. But there's no news on at 9:00 at night. And there's no reason to give a traffic report.

"I overslept," I explained weakly. "I'm sorry. I'll be in soon."

She accepted the news and let it go, not knowing that I hadn't overslept. I hadn't actually slept at all. And I hadn't blacked out either. There was no foul taste of sleep in my mouth, no overnight's growth of beard. I had sat down in my chair and lost more than twelve hours. Somehow, I knew that I had skipped those hours, just like flipping extra pages in a book. The implications of the event were terrifying. I envisioned myself skipping months or even years, coming to in an alien world with people I didn't know or recognize. I kept these revelations carefully to myself, not wishing to alarm my mother in her fragile state or, worse, illicit sympathy or aid from my brothers. I told only my psychiatrist who, quite predictably, began to see me as more of a mental case than a physical one. I think I stretched the limits of her imagination to the point where she was sure I was delusional. She suggested and even prescribed medication, but I was averse to taking it. Unless I had shaved and brushed my teeth while not knowing who or where I was, then I was not delusional.

My mother's visit to the hospital turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Through evidence left behind by her collapse, the doctors were

able to pinpoint her problem and begin treatment. Treatments were three times a week and very taxing on my time, but the results were noticeable and immediate. As she got better, I began to settle down. Jeremy and Wyatt had to make fewer trips to the city and things began to return to normal. All through the rest of June and July, I saw my mother through what appeared to be a complete recovery. We went twice together to visit the family and I went twice by myself. Jeremy must have spoken with Martie because her demeanor had changed somewhat. Behind her eyes, I could still see the truth, but she had become cordial. Even Devin engaged me in some conversation.

Things were going so well that Jeremy called and asked if it would be okay for Livvie to spend a weekend with me in the city. Livvie, being the only offspring of my brothers who actually thought of me as a human being, had come up with the idea as a way of both cheering me up and getting out from under the oppressive glare of her mother for a weekend. I was only too happy to accommodate.

We chose the weekend of August 18th for the trip. My mother's treatments ended on the 16th, a Thursday, so I agreed to pick Livvie up at Grand Central the next day. At about a quarter after five on Friday, I was waiting on the 59th Street platform, surrounded by a throng of hot and uncomfortable rush hour travelers. I was leaning over a bench, staring at a newspaper on an empty seat. The headline read **ABDELAZIZ TO SPEAK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO**. For me what happened next was the most uncanny experience of my life. It was almost as if the world had just sped up around me until there was nothing but a buzz left in its wake. And then I was almost alone on the platform. The newspaper was gone, replaced on the bench by a homeless man who slept soundly if not soundlessly. The station was silent except for the hollow wail of the wind through the tunnels. Blinking, I checked my watch and it read a quarter after five on Friday. Immediately I began to relax. If time had not changed, then I had not lost any time. Could it be that I was suddenly inside myself during a blackout?

I didn't know what to do.

Having a need to feel the air, I moved off of the platform and made for the street. It was dark out, which was odd for this time in August in New York. If that wasn't enough of a clue that something was terribly wrong, the scarcity of pedestrians was.

I was not on the street a full minute when my cell phone began to vibrate. Pulling it out of my pocket I saw that I had a voicemail message. Perhaps it was me calling myself, telling myself to wake up.

Then I noticed the time on the phone's screen. It was just about midnight and the date was August 19th. I looked at my watch. It read close to six. But my phone received information, time and date included, from the network. My watch registered time based on its own existence. I had lost two days. It wasn't even fair to say that I had blacked out for two days. I had not blacked out. If I had, the time on my watch would have changed. I would have been extremely hungry and thirsty. Any number of things about my physical appearance would have changed. These were not blackouts. I had no idea what they were. Perhaps I was being abducted by aliens and tested with the fabled probes. But there was no evidence of that except time loss. And the expanding increments of time lost were becoming truly alarming. What hadn't been done this past weekend that had desperately needed doing?

Livvie!

Dialing quickly into my voicemail, I listened to seventeen messages. The first four were from Livvie, each of intensifying concern. That poor child had been left alone in Grand Central Station for hours. Calls from Jeremy followed, the first ones angry and then next ones concerned. There was even a call from Wyatt. My mother called several times as well. Jeremy had called her to complain about me, but she had defended my integrity. My integrity be damned! There wasn't even one message telling me what had become of Livvie.

Frustrated, I dialed out Jeremy's number.

"Hello?" came Martie's groggy answer.

"It's Mathew, Martie. Please let me speak to Jeremy."

"*Mathew!*" There was anger in that cry and words that followed, but my brother must have wrested the phone from her clawed fingers.

"Mathew?"

"Is Livvie okay?" I asked.

"She's fine," he said, but his tone betrayed no feelings. "She's home."

"Thank God."

"And no thanks to you."

"Jeremy, I had another...spell."

"You're not calling them blackouts anymore?"

"It's not a blackout. I've lost time. My watch still says it's Friday."

He was silent for a moment, chewing on my story I felt. In the background, I could hear Martie huffing and puffing, every once in a while blowing a few words my way.

“Livvie’s fine,” he said eventually. “But you’d better explain it to her yourself. Call her tomorrow. Tonight you should check yourself into a hospital.”

And then he hung up, leaving me with no sense of support or even condemnation. Despite his abrupt ending of the conversation, I had no idea how he truly felt. Check myself into a hospital? What was that supposed to mean? Would that solve my problems or would I just be imprisoning myself so that I couldn’t do anyone any more harm. The worst part was that I had to be at work in a few hours without having had the benefit of two days off. I was suddenly exhausted, though I felt jet lagged because, for me, it was only six in the evening. Still, I took the train back to my apartment and went right to bed.

I awakened feeling groggy, disoriented, and in a panic. That panic grew as I began to wonder whether or not it had happened again. Had I gone to bed and now gotten up a month later? I quickly checked the clocks and, because I didn’t trust them anymore, turned on the television. The time and date confirmed that I had remained firmly rooted during my slumber, but that I had in fact lost an entire weekend to my enigmatic condition. I considered calling in sick from work but rejected the idea once my head began to clear. There would be nothing else that I could do and I desperately needed some form of routine at that moment.

On the subway I looked over the Monday morning crowd. Many of those people I saw every day and recognized them. Others I saw every day and did not recognize them. They were students and workers, parents and children. They were a melting pot of shapes, sizes, and races. In the years that I had been working, more and more books and newspapers had disappeared, only to be replaced by MP3 players and PDAs. A girl frowned into a textbook. An older lady chuckled at something that went directly into her ears and her ears only. A man cursed loudly at no one in particular. I wondered who they were and what problems they faced on a daily basis. Did they have stressful jobs or sick relatives? Did any of them lose large chunks of time at any given moment? Could they read that on my face? Was my freakish condition apparent to them?

I waited until lunchtime and then started making my phone calls. The first was to my mother to let her know that I was alive and well. She asked what had happened and I gave her the story in vague terms. I did not confide in her my true fears, but instead told her that it was likely due to stress at work and it would pass. The latter was a desperate hope. The former, an outright lie.

Next I called Jeremy's house and asked to speak with Livvie. Jeremy was always home in the summer. I don't know how he pulled it off, but he had more days off in the two months of summer than I got all year round. He told me she was out, but I knew that he was lying and I pressed him. I think that alone is what swayed him. I never pressed Jeremy on anything. I never pressed *anyone* on anything. But Livvie was important to me, maybe the most important person in the world. I couldn't let her think that I had simply abandoned her. Even if she thought I was going insane, it would be better than her hating me.

She was cold when she took the phone.

"Livvie, I need to explain what happened."

"Do you have any idea how I felt?" she asked me accusingly.

"No," I answered. "But I know that I would never put you in that position intentionally."

"Mom told me I shouldn't listen to your 'cockamamie story'."

I felt rage. Did Martie hate me so much that she would sabotage my relationship with Livvie? Apparently so. Apparently, she was seizing this opportunity and squeezing every last drop out of its fruit. "Your mother's always hated me. You know that, don't you?"

She was silent for a time, probably gauging how to respond. It was hard for me to remember that I was talking to a fifteen year old girl. Livvie was so smart and, often times, seemed so much like an adult that if you didn't have her right in front of you, you couldn't always tell.

"I'm sorry, Livvie," I told her finally. "I don't want to put you in between me and your mother and I'm sure she doesn't either. I just called because I want you to know that you are the most important person in the world to me. If I had a daughter, I would want her to be you. I couldn't stand it if I thought you hated me or thought I would do something to hurt you. And I know my story sounds cockamamie, like your mother says, but it's the truth. And..."

"No more, Uncle Mathew. Please..."

"You need to hear this, Livvie." There was a desperate tone in my voice and I knew later that it wasn't she who needed to hear it, but me who needed to say it. "I'm not sick and I'm not crazy. And I'm not blacking out, like your parents may have told you. I thought it was blackouts, but it's not. I'm literally disappearing and each time I do, it gets longer and longer. I don't change. I don't age and I don't move. I just reappear a minute or an hour or a day later. This time it was two days and the next time it may be two weeks or two years. And one day, one day, Livvie, I won't come back. So I need to know that *you* know

that I love you more than any other person on this planet. Can you tell me that you know that, Livvie?"

She was silent again and I knew that I had crossed the line. I waited a few seconds to see if she would respond, but she didn't so I asked her to put her father on the phone.

"What the hell did you say to her, Mathew?"

"I just told her that I love her."

"She looks like you smacked her in the face with a fish."

"I'm sorry. Just tell her I'm sorry, Jeremy. Okay?"

But I hung up before he could respond and he didn't try to call me back. After that, I went back to work and did almost nothing for the remainder of the day. The man in the next cubicle, Morty Yovanovicz, took notice of my catatonic appearance and commented on it.

Morty was a nice old guy, a couple of years from retirement. He was friendly if not my friend, but today he had a look of genuine concern on his face. He tried to tell me that things were sometimes good and sometimes bad and it was always worth it to weather the bad times so that we could enjoy the good ones. If only he knew my problems. When he invited me to have dinner with him, I accepted.

I must have been desperate for human companionship. It's not that Morty was hard to get along with. It's just that I was never the social type. When I was younger, I was too intimidated to make many close friends. As I got older I found that what had started out as timidity evolved into disinterest. I set my own routines and settled myself into them like a comfortable chair. I did not like to have to get up. But now my condition was causing increasing interruptions in my schedule and was beginning to have dire effects on my life. I had long since learned to live with the bad blood between Martie and me. In fact, it had grown into an accepted, and acceptable factor of my life. I don't know what I would have done had she started to like me. But fighting with Livvie I couldn't handle. I needed to find a way to get through to her.

Against my better judgment, I confided in Morty. At first, he didn't really know how to react. None of my coworkers really *knew* me, but they had never known me to exhibit any kind of sense of humor and the idea of a practical joke such as this was confounding. Morty couldn't figure out whether I was serious or making a poor attempt at pulling his leg. He found himself caught between the rock of not wanting to make light of my serious situation and the hard place of not wanting to be the butt of my joke.

I told him that I was serious and elaborated. I told him about the other “blackouts” and made it quite clear by my telling that these were actual events. Well I can’t say that he believed me but I can’t say that he dismissed me either. He did offer that there would be very little I could do to get Livvie to accept my explanation of events unless she wanted to and it was probably best if I just lay low for a while. The advice was appreciated even if it was not quite what I wanted to hear.

Over the next several weeks, Morty and I developed a real friendship. I stopped seeing my psychiatrist (what was the point, really?) and, with my mother doing well, found that I had a lot of free time. Morty, who was divorced, was the perfect companion for me. He was soft spoken and unassuming, yet always displayed a pleasant demeanor and good humor. His own daughter was approaching fifty years old and lived in Arizona and his ex-wife had remarried and moved to Florida. What I found out about Morty Yovanovicz was that he was a desperately lonely guy who almost succeeded at hiding it. But the best thing about him was that he was always there. If I took too long in the bathroom at work, he came to make sure I hadn’t leaped through time. Every once in a while he would call me in the middle of the night just to see if I was still moving at “normal speed” as he put it. He woke me up a couple of times, but his intentions were good and I found it difficult to feel anything but warmth toward him.

In short, Morty helped me to relax.

From the middle of August through the beginning of October, things seemed to be going well. I waited a week before calling Jeremy again and his anger seemed to have cooled. Livvie didn’t want to speak with me yet, but Jeremy assured me that she was starting to soften. Martie, on the other hand, had gone back to hating me and showing it. If she answered the phone when I called, she hung it up immediately. I never knew what to do in those moments, so I usually did nothing. I would always receive a call from Jeremy later on so at least she had the decency to tell him I had called.

I didn’t visit with them. Jeremy and Wyatt came out to see me once and that was nice. We spoke mostly about our childhoods; we laughed a little. The strain on our relationship did give me the opportunity to realize how important they were in my life. I could only hope that they felt the same way. When you’re a kid, you fight with your siblings or you ignore them. Generally, siblings are apart in age and they build their own social lives. Sometimes they compete. More often than not, there is an animosity that builds between them. But if things go well, that

animosity fades with maturity. No matter what our differences were, my brothers and I all came from the same place. The three of us shared something that no one else in the world possessed and that bond was surprisingly strong.

On Wednesday morning, the 3rd of October, I got out of bed, showered, dressed, drank some coffee, and went to work. Only when I arrived did I realize that something was wrong. I had offhandedly noticed that the train was more empty than usual, but the light of day seemed right. There had been nothing to tip me off until I arrived at an empty office. Since I don't have a key, I was forced to wait outside the door for someone to show up. That someone was Estelle Goldblatt, the company receptionist. She was due in, daily, thirty minutes before everyone else. She was more surprised to see me than she normally would have been but declined comment. In fact, she practically ignored me, opening the door and going inside without even holding it for me.

I began to get that nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach. The office looked the same so I couldn't have missed *that* much time. But, clearly I had missed enough to raise a few eyebrows. My desk was disturbed. At least it hadn't been cleared out. There was, however, the definite indication that someone had been sitting there and using my computer. As I switched it on, I heard someone enter at the front. There were whispers and, just as the computer finished booting and I saw the date, I realized that it was my boss who had just arrived.

Needless to say, I was in a meeting with her inside of ten minutes.

"Where the hell have you been?" she asked.

1. My boss was convinced I'd skipped out for a vacation to the Caribbean, which was ridiculous.

"You never called in," she said. "You didn't take any time. You didn't answer your phone. I even asked someone to go by your apartment, but you didn't answer the door. I was just about to begin interviewing."

So I explained the situation to her, using the term "blackout" instead of "time jumping", which was my suspicion. Of course, I could produce all of my medical records (which would have been reported to my company for insurance reasons anyway) as proof of my condition. But they were inconclusive. All they would prove is that I had been seeking medical advice on the condition. I could ask Morty to testify on my behalf, but I hated to put him in the middle of it. Besides which, he didn't necessarily know that I was telling the truth.

"You mean to tell me," she said in a very snide way that I did not appreciate but would never mention, "that you were home the whole time, passed out in bed..."

"Blacked out," I corrected.

"Look at you, Mathew," she said.

So I looked at me.

"If you were passed out, forgive me, blacked out, in your bed for a week, you'd be a rotting corpse."

She was right, of course, and I could offer no response to her allegations but the truth. I tried very delicately to explain that these were not simple blackouts, but that I was being swept from one moment to another, skipping large chunks of time in between. The explanation meant little or nothing to her. She took it as a poorly conceived lie, but gave me credit for originality. In the end, she chose not to fire me. As I said, I was just the kind of employee she liked, and she hated to give that up in favor of some young go-getter looking to move up the corporate ladder. There was no official policy of probation in my company, but she used that word when she described my status. One more screw-up and I was out. To me that just meant it was a matter of time before my job was taken away from me. To date, I could neither anticipate nor prevent the jumps.

Morty had arrived by the time I got back to my desk. He didn't seem so surprised to see me so I can only assume that he had heard I was back. But he did stare straight through me from the time I came into view until the time I just couldn't take it anymore.

"It happened again?" he asked.

I nodded.

"For a week?"

I became irritated, but I had learned to control it. For a time, we didn't speak. I went about checking my files and figuring out what I was supposed to do. The items on which I had last been working were completed or mostly completed. There were no new items, which meant they had been ferried out to other people. If it was true that my boss was about to start interviewing, that meant she couldn't afford to have my position vacant. Sure enough, as I sat trying to get my bearings, new assignments kept popping up on my computer via the company's intranet. There wasn't anything too taxing, but I was still so disoriented that I couldn't manage to focus.

"Where do you go?"

"I don't go anywhere," I snapped back at Morty, who had done no work in thirty minutes. He just kept looking at me. "It's not a vacation."

"I didn't mean that," he apologized. "But you have to be somewhere, right?"

I had never really given that any thought. In truth, it didn't seem as if my location changed at all. When I was supposed to pick up Livvie at the train station, I didn't move. When I was at the hospital, changing clothes, I didn't move. Or, at least, I didn't appear to move. What if there was some other personality inside of me that simply took over, living its own life? And when its periods were over and done with, it returned me to the same place as before.

And yet, that made no sense. That particular personality would have to be aware of the charade in order to set my watch back to the proper date and time and put me in the very same clothing and make sure that I was just as tired or hungry or that I had the same urge to go to the bathroom or not. It was too impossible.

"I don't think I actually do move. I'm pretty sure I just stay in the same spot."

"I went by your apartment over the weekend," Morty said. "You weren't there."

"I don't think I can answer the door in the middle of it."

"I didn't think so. So I went inside. You should have your super fired. He takes bribes."

I dismissed that last bit. "So I wasn't in the apartment? Anywhere?"

He shook his head. "I asked around, too. No one had seen you leave or anything."

An idea struck me. Again, it seemed unreasonable, but I pulled out my credit card and dialed the customer service number on the back. After negotiating my way through the automatic phone service and providing nineteen pieces of personal information, a representative was able to tell me that my card hadn't been used in the week during which I was missing. It confirmed my suspicion, but didn't provide any answers. What *did* happen to me during those times? Was I safe?

Time passed. I was very busy at work. It took me almost a week to catch up. I had to make sure that I arrived every morning before my boss or I got a phone call. I had to make sure that I left late, not on time, or she would ask questions. In the mean time, I began to feel that desperation creeping in again. I was consumed by the idea that, at any time, I could leap forward and not even know it. How far would I leap this

time? A month? A year? There didn't seem to be any discernable pattern.

I spent most of my free time trying to map out my different leaps and researching my condition on the internet and in the library. There were some isolated incidents that could be deemed similar, but I was skeptical.

I found one report of a slave who consistently disappeared and would later reappear in the same place. He had been branded a witch and sentenced to burn.

There was another about a Scottish jet pilot whose plane had crashed. Rescuers found him bewildered and unharmed in the wreckage. He couldn't remember the crash and described the whole thing as if he had simply winked out of existence and then reappeared after the disaster.

Stories like this were all over the web and, instead of giving me a feeling of comfort in not being alone, I branded the lot of them crackpots and felt more alone than ever.

My mother fell ill again. Jeremy insisted that my recent disappearance contributed to her poor state of mind. I didn't necessarily disagree with him, but that didn't change the fact that it was totally out of my control. I tried to explain this to him, but, despite our earlier reconciliation, a week of tending to our mother had left him bitter all over again. The truth was that he didn't believe my story. I don't know if he exactly *disbelieved* it, but he was sure of a simple explanation and without sympathy. Surprisingly, it was Wyatt who came to my defense. Of the two of them, Jeremy had always been the one to whom I had turned for support. As the older of my two brothers, he had always seemed the wiser and the more in command. But Wyatt had a compassionate streak that was hidden behind a very quiet façade. Despite their unbreachable closeness, Wyatt painted his reactions to Jeremy's behavior very carefully. He did not choose to be Jeremy's humble servant or yes-man under any circumstances. As my older brother became more incensed, my younger brother showed me more kindness. Thought I knew it was only partly a sympathetic gesture towards me, I was desperate for the support. Wyatt didn't necessarily believe my story either, but he was more patient about listening to it.

Impatient, Jeremy asked me one early November day, "What are we going to do, Mathew?"

The question caught me off guard. To begin with, Jeremy would never deign to ask for my suggestion on anything so important. Here I could not discern his meaning. Did he want to know my solution for my

time hopping or was he simply rhetorically questioning himself? Even if I had known the meaning of his question, I would not have had an answer.

He didn't wait for one. "If you can't take care of mom..."

"I can't," I blurted, only much later realizing how that must have sounded. As an outsider looking in, I would have branded myself a weasel; just some lazy slob trying to get out of a family obligation. But from the inside it made too much sense. How could my mother count on me for anything when I couldn't even count on myself?

Jeremy was silent after that and the conversation ended without resolution. Wyatt called me a short time later to find out what had been said, but the transcript gave him no insight.

"Mom will be okay," he told me. "You're not her only son."

I didn't know how to interpret that statement either, but I was at a point of defensiveness so that my reaction was not relief but anger. I had never implied that I was her only son and I had never asked for the job of sole caregiver. It had been thrust upon me as a virtue of not having built a family of my own. On those rare occasions when I had been forced to ask for help, Jeremy's stuttering replies had always led me to tell him not to worry about it. I would handle it. Only now I couldn't handle it.

But I could say none of this to Wyatt. Though my control of my internal thoughts and emotions seemed to be withering away in the face of my condition, my external reactions were intact.

For the moment.

The night before I jumped again, I had dinner with Morty. I had come into work agitated because of an argument I'd had with my mother the night before. That morning, Jeremy had called me, furious, wanting to know why I had upset her. The truth is I can't even remember what the argument was about. It was silly, as they all are, but I was on edge. Instead of the passage of normal time easing me into a state of comfort, I was becoming more and more panicked. Earlier on, I had the reassurance of having just leaped, meaning that I wouldn't leap again right away simply because I had never done so. But now it had been weeks and I knew that my time was soon to come. That morning, I was the picture of the caffeinated man. There was enough adrenaline in my body to power a city.

So Morty offered to take me out to dinner.

"Have a meal with someone who doesn't bother to judge you," he said, and it sounded like a good idea.

And it was. Dinner with Morty was relaxing and fun. I was able to unwind and laugh a bit. But when I got home, there was a message from Jeremy and another from Wyatt. Even Wyatt sounded impatient. I called neither of them back, choosing instead to toss and turn for hours before exhaustion was finally the victor over agitation and I slept.

The next day began like any other day. I got up, showered, had some coffee, and went off to work. Morty could see by the look on my face that our dinner together hadn't had a lasting effect. He described my expression as the penultimate step to resolution. It was as if I were a terminally ill person who was just about ready to accept my fate. In truth, acceptance was the furthest thing from my mind. What I needed was the ability to sort this thing out. At about a quarter to four, the light on my phone went on. This was odd because I rarely received phone calls.

"This is Mathew Cristian," I said into the receiver.

"Uncle Mathew? It's Livvie."

I was too stunned to respond. I just sat there, the phone to my ear, Morty staring at me from across the aisle.

"Uncle Mathew?"

"I'm here, sorry."

"I didn't mean to call you at work, but your cell phone's off."

It wasn't off; the battery was dead. In the wake of my stress, I had forgotten to charge it. I told her it was good to hear from her.

"Mom and Dad have been arguing a lot."

Again, I didn't know how to respond so I just didn't. Arguments between Martie and Jeremy were rare. Even when Martie was up in arms about something, Jeremy usually gave her some space and yessed her until she felt better.

"Sometimes they argue about Grandma," Livvie continue. "But mostly it's about you. Uncle Wyatt's been here a few times also, but he doesn't have much to say. Can I ask you a question?"

I nodded, then realized how foolish that was and said, "Yes."

"Is it true? What you say has been happening to you, is it happening?"

"It's true," I said.

"Because Dad says you're just trying to escape from your life, like your life's not good enough or something. Mom thinks you're having a nervous breakdown."

"What does Wyatt think?" I asked, not positive that I wanted to know the answer.

"I'm not really sure. Like I said, he doesn't say much. I think he agrees with Dad, but he feels sorry for you while Dad's just angry."

That was consistent with their behavior. "What do you think?"

"I think I believe you. I talked about it with Jack."

Jack, my oldest nephew, lived in and out of the house with his family depending on his job or school situation. He was rapidly approaching twenty years old and had never yet been able to stick with one thing for more than a couple of months. Toward me he was either abrasive or silent. I suspected there was drug use. Martie did not speak of him often, but when she did there was this gleam in her eye. He was her first born and he could do no wrong.

"He doesn't like you," Livvie told me.

"I know," I said without knowing why I said it.

"Oh. Well I never knew. But I think he's a lot like you."

That came as a surprise, but I was too tired to show it.

"Anyway," she continued. "The reason I'm calling is because I think Mom has Dad on the ropes, you know?"

"I don't."

"Well, she's almost got Dad convinced that you're nuts. She's talking about forcing you to get 'help'."

That last bit made me angry, very angry. Even though she had very little chance of being able to accomplish something like that, I was overwhelmed by just how much animosity she had toward me. What I wouldn't tell Livvie was that Martie had absolutely no concern for my well being. She simply hated me and wanted to make me pay for saddling them with the responsibility of my mother. Livvie probably knew it anyway.

What I said was, "Don't worry, Livvie. It takes a lot to have someone committed."

"Oh," she answered, a bit bewildered, as if the comment was a non-sequitor. "Well, I just felt you should know where they stand."

The conversation hung silent for a few moments.

"I know you didn't mean to hurt me, Uncle Mathew," she said at last.

"Thank you," I choked.

"Okay then. Well... bye."

"Bye, Livvie," I whispered, and waited for the click to sound before I hung up the phone.

"You okay, Mathew?" Morty asked after a few seconds.

"Yeah," I said, but it was a lie. In me there was anger and sadness and a little bit of joy at a reconciliation with my niece. The conflicting

emotions were dragging on me, making it impossible for me to think about anything else.

I stood.

“Mathew? Where are you going?”

“What?” Going? I hadn’t thought about going anywhere. “The bathroom, I guess.”

And to the bathroom I went.

My office shared a bathroom with three other offices on that floor. In order to get there, I had to make my way out of the cubicle area into the outer reception area. Estelle glared at me as I emerged. She always did that lately, as if she expected me to disappear before her very eyes. I suppose that could have happened, but it didn’t and that was the very last time I saw Estelle anyway, so what does it all matter? There was a short corridor that housed a corner office to my left and the other office to my right. The bathroom was at the far end of the hall, just opposite the staircase. I went in to find it deserted, which was a pleasant surprise.

I wasn’t inside long. I let myself into a stall only to realize that going there was just an excuse for not working. What I really needed was some time and some air. I had about an hour until the end of the work week and most of everything was pretty wrapped up. Maybe I could get Morty to go out again. Even though I didn’t even unzip my trousers, I washed my hands and stepped out into the corridor. A police officer just entering the staircase turned at the sound of my exit and looked startled upon seeing me.

“What are you still doing up here?” he cried out.

“What?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“Is there anyone else in there?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

He didn’t take my word for it, opening the door and yelling into the room. He then turned back to me. “Didn’t you hear the alarm? Dammit I checked that bathroom!”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand.”

“There’s a bomb in the building,” he explained. “We’ve been clearing it for the past half hour.”

“But I was only in there for a minute,” I told him. “Just...” I checked my watch in terror, but it read Friday, November 23rd, 3:58pm. It was quite obviously wrong.

He led me out of the building, not interested in any explanations. Why should he be? As we moved down the stairs, he radioed his superiors. Based on what I could decipher from the garbled radio talk, I was

suddenly being considered a suspect. Two other police officers rendezvoused with us in the staircase. I said nothing to them, realizing the futility of trying to explain my condition. My medical records would back up my story, although I didn't know how many days I had missed this time and how truly thin the concept of "blackouts" had become.

The street outside was empty of pedestrian traffic. There were police cars and bomb squad vans. I was rushed away from the building, but the police were keeping a close eye on me. Then I caught sight of my boss at the corner and I called out to her. I couldn't believe the look on her face once she recognized me, which she didn't do immediately. She spoke to a policeman by the barricade and he let her through.

"Please," I said, suddenly a little bit frantic. "Tell them I work here."

"Worked here," she corrected.

"It's happened again," I explained to her. "Look at my watch."

She could plainly see the time and date, but did not lose her cold demeanor.

"I just went to the bathroom. Morty will tell you."

Her expression went blank. Even the police officers saw it. It's amazing how the change in one person can butterfly out to affect all of the surrounding people. Just the mention of Morty's name had triggered something in her to which her psyche was not prepared to react.

"What?" I asked, even though I already knew. "What is it?"

So she told me and that made it true. Morty was dead.

Upon hearing that news, the oddest thing happened. I blacked out. The news of Morty's death shocked me something awful. Less than ten minutes before, I had answered his concerns with absentmindedness. But he had experienced some unknown amount of time in those ten minutes and died as a result of it. What's more, I was suddenly beginning to understand that the effects of these time jumps, which were still increasing in length, were broadening at an exponential rate. In the time I was gone, the life of someone I knew had ended. A shock from which others had recovered was now new to me. The pain was intense, like a great squeezing of the fabric of my own consciousness. I must have fallen because I came to as I hit the curb.

"Are you okay?" one of the policemen was asking me.

"No," I replied, still woozy. I looked up to see my boss' icy gaze and found, much to my surprise, that I was angry. My anger was clearly directed at her, but I couldn't say why. As I stood from the curb, though, there was a hard edge to my tone that I had never heard before.

"When? How?"

There was no sympathy to be found. "He was hit by a bus more than two weeks ago. You're supposed to be his friend."

It was an indictment and I didn't like it one bit. "*How would I know about it?!*" I spat back at her. And I mean spat. Globes of spittle and mucus flew from my rabid mouth and washed over her. This, finally, drew a reaction. Whatever meekness I had displayed throughout the course of my life fled in the face of this tragedy and this insolent bitch that dared to make light of its impact. I did not back down nor did I apologize for spitting on her. I met her gaze full on and dared her to challenge me.

And she did not.

But it was a limp victory at best. Morty was dead. I couldn't believe it. Literally, I couldn't believe it. The police had no evidence on which they could base a charge so I was released without ever being formally arrested. I did not bother to stand around and see the drama through to its conclusion. My job was someone else's and my friend was gone. There was no longer any need for me to be there. Marching through the crowd, I met the gazes of my former co-workers and found, much to my surprise, that they looked away in embarrassment. I did not understand this, nor do I ever expect to find an answer. It's actually one of those great matters of irrelevance that sparks curiosity and then quickly degrades into fleeting memory.

Finally, I moved past the lot of them, out of the throng of onlookers, and into the open streets. I had to walk several blocks before I could find a train station that was open and running, but the walk did me good. It helped me to believe that I was leaving my troubles behind as I left that place and those people behind.

I could not have been more wrong.

Chapter 2

I had left reality on November 23rd. It was now January 3rd, a Thursday. I had missed the New Year, not that that meant much to me. I'm not the party type. I usually spent New Years with the family or at home. So I had lost almost six weeks.

And a good friend.

And my mother.

In the intervening weeks she had also passed, the news given to me by an irate message left by Jeremy on the first of December. My brothers, who had had to deal with all of the arrangements and the estate by themselves, were extremely sore with me.

Even Wyatt would not take my calls. As the afternoon turned into evening, I felt myself entirely alone. My life had spun completely out of control. I was at the whim of these lost bits of time. While I had been in limbo, two lives had ended. It got me to thinking about the changing world. What else had I missed?

Well I had missed more lives. Apparently, the bomb threat called into my former office building was not an isolated event. And many of them were more than threats. Just before Christmas, the man who was uniting the Middle East, Abdelaziz, had been assassinated. No one claimed responsibility. Everyone blamed the United States. Though Abdelaziz's successors openly condemned terrorist activity and denied any suspicion of the United States, every two-bit Jyhaddist in the world was out for blood. It was a sorry state of affairs and it dominated the news channels, of course. People were frightened and angry. There were new laws in place and new strength to the Patriot Act. There was talk of martial law. I hadn't just stepped from November into January. I had stepped into a totally different world, one that I did not like. Imagine the effects of culture shock and jet lag rolled into one catastrophic ball and dropped on your head. Add to that the fact that everything looked the same and felt the same. It all just wasn't the same.

I had to call my landlord and thank him for not locking me out. He explained that he was on the verge of doing so and it was a good thing I

called. When was he getting paid? I immediately wrote out two rent checks for December 1st and January 1st. I would send them in the morning. A couple of paychecks had gone into my account during my "absence", but it was pretty clear where they had stopped. If I minimized my spending, I would be okay for a couple of months, but I had to get a job. I did not live an extravagant lifestyle, so money tended to accumulate for me. But it would not be enough.

On the 4th of January, I got up early, dressed against the cold, and took the train and the bus out to the cemetery where Jeremy and Wyatt had buried my mother. I didn't quite know how to feel, the whole of it being still so unreal to me. There was a bitter wind and flurries in the air as I approached the grave with the apprehension of the unknown.

The stone was new, having only been placed the week before. Below the engraving of her name and dates of life, my brothers had requested an epitaph. *A good woman who gave better than her best.* It wasn't a terrible way to sum up her life. As I stood before it, though, I marveled that I did not feel any guilt for not having been there. Truthfully, I could take no blame for my absence. Given the choice, I would certainly have held her hand through those final moments, giving her my love and encouragement (how do you encourage the dying?). What I felt was cheated. Denied those final moments, I had been robbed of any reconciliation with the past and the opportunity to say the very important things that needed to be said. It was ridiculous, really. People die suddenly all the time and their loved ones are robbed of those same opportunities. It is a fact of life that death is the perfect sniper. In truth, what was stolen was, in fact, priceless, but it was not stolen from me. Imagine my mother on her death bed, her two eldest sons and grandchildren standing around her. The air is heavy with the moisture of tears. Wyatt is whispering to my mother that it will all be ok, but she knows that she is dying. She may have hours or she may have minutes. It doesn't matter. All that she can ask is, "Where is Mathew? Where is my son?"

I can't say whether or not my brothers had bothered to try and explain my situation to her. I don't know what they said or how they said it. The truth would have sounded a hollow excuse. Had I taken the time to talk to her beforehand, she may have understood. She may have decided the timing too convenient and died with hate for me in her heart. But she would have had that choice. The way it was, all she could have had was bewilderment, a bewilderment that I forced upon her. In recent years, our conversations had fallen to the trivial and I had not even thought to try and explain my situation to her. This woman who had

comforted me as a child, held my hand while I lay sick out of fear or illness throughout my adolescent years, I had deemed incapable of processing the circumstances. And, as a result, she had been robbed of a basic comfort at the time of her death. And it was I who had robbed it from her.

So I did not feel guilty, but I did feel angry. I felt ashamed. It was a mistake I could never take back. And a mistake I could never forget.

Standing there in the cold wind and snow, tears freezing on my cheeks, I wept openly because I knew that the wounds inflicted during life scarred badly.

The trip back to my apartment in Manhattan was long and lonely. I had brought a paperback with me, but couldn't find the reserves with which I might concentrate on it. Once back home, I climbed the three flights of stairs to my apartment, rather than use the elevator, and found I had two visitors.

Both were men and both were police officers, but both were dressed in suits and long coats. Both were already inside the apartment.

The senior of the two men was a squat black man with graying hair crowning the back of his head. He presented me with a smile and a badge and introduced himself as Detective Remy Winslow. I placed him in his upper forties. He was probably eligible to retire, but seemed to very much like his work.

The younger man was more reserved, regarding me with instant suspicion. His expression remained passive as he showed me his badge. Though he said nothing by way of introduction, he held the badge out long enough for me to read his name. Warren Li. Detective Li was much taller than his companion with an unusually large frame for an Asian. His face was square without the hint of five o'clock shadow. I disliked him immediately without, oddly enough, the sense of being intimidated.

I was annoyed at their appearance and even moreso by the fact that they had chosen to enter my apartment uninvited. This anger, which seemed more and more to be taking hold of me, prompted a challenge. "Do you have a warrant?"

Winslow's expression was one of confusion while his partner seemed to grow irritated by the question. It was Winslow who responded.

"We're not here to arrest you, Mr. Cristian."

"You haven't the right be in my apartment either."

Winslow looked around as if only just noticing his surroundings, but Li was unwilling to put on a show. He responded this time. "The law grants certain latitude in cases of terrorist activities." I noticed that he

did not use the word *latitude* as a way of sugar coating another meaning. It was the word he had chosen for his explanation. He was telling me in a way that suited him that he could do whatever he wanted. I identified him as pompous.

Closing the door behind me, I began to shrug out of my coat. The two gentlemen had originally made themselves comfortable on the couch. When I had walked in, Winslow was reading a novel, which he had quickly stashed inside his coat, and Li had been staring at the door.

The good host in me demanded that I offer them a drink. The angry and depressed individual that was on the outside squashed that impulse. Even the threat implied by Li's statement had had no effect on me.

"I thought that had all been cleared up," I told them.

It was Li who said, "At that time, we were unaware that you had been fired from your job recently."

And that, of course, would be my motive. "I didn't find that out until the day of the threat."

"About that..." This time it was Winslow who spoke. His entire tone and demeanor were different. It was clear that each of them was meant to ask certain types of questions. Their styles could keep a person off guard, while each different question could be posed in a correct way as determined by the two detectives. "Your replacement had actually been on the job for almost three weeks on January 3rd. What's unclear is that you say you didn't know you were...let go...and yet someone else was doing your job."

"I hadn't been to work in a while."

"Any particular reason?" This, from Li.

I hesitated, unwittingly giving them the impression that they had caught me in a lie. The trouble was that they had caught me in the truth. "I have been experiencing episodes of lost time."

"I'm not sure I understand," Winslow said.

"One minute it's six o'clock on Friday. The next minute it's 3 o'clock on the following Wednesday."

Winslow looked like he was trying to understand. Li looked skeptical.

"When did this happen to you last?" Li asked.

"November 23rd. Around four o'clock."

"And the 'next minute' was the morning of January 3rd?"

I nodded. I didn't expect them to believe me. My own brothers didn't believe me.

Winslow took over again. "So, where were you for all of that time?"

I shrugged very matter of factly. This was becoming old hat to me. "Nowhere."

"You don't sound sure," Li accused.

"I'm not sure," I replied.

"Does anyone else know about this?" Winslow asked.

"No one who believes me," I answered. "Except maybe Morty."

Winslow suddenly produced a pad and flipped through it. "That would be...Morris Yovanovicz?"

If I was supposed to be surprised about the fact that the detectives had Morty's name on hand, I wasn't. I just nodded.

There was this uncomfortable silence between us. I stood there, looking from detective to detective, each one looking at me. I suppose they were looking for some facial expression that might give away some vital piece of hidden information. But I was hiding nothing. If they wanted to know something, they would simply have to ask.

So they did. Or, rather, Winslow did.

"Um...you are aware that Mr. Yovanovicz is deceased?"

"I'm aware," I said sadly, under my breath. Morty's death seemed far away. Even though, by my reckoning, I had seen him just two days before, the interruption of my schedule and the loss of my mother had detached me from reality. All of the people I knew and all of the things I normally did seemed surreal.

Li asked, "Can you account for your whereabouts on December 17th, about six o'clock in the evening?"

The question caught me off guard and I hesitated, trying to figure out what I had been doing on that date. It took only a moment for me to realize that I had missed it completely, but the hesitation was noticeable and branded me a liar once again.

"I wasn't anywhere," I said. "I told you that."

Li continued, "Of course you did. Can anyone corroborate that for you?"

I looked at him as if expecting him to suddenly understand what I was trying to say before realizing that he understood completely and was simply ignoring my answers. "What's so special about the 17th?"

Winslow said not unkindly, "That was the day Mr. Yovanovicz was killed."

1. "Do you think I was driving the bus?"

"Of course not," Li said without any hint of emotion. "The bus driver's interview is on record. Witnesses, however, claim that Mr. Yovanovicz 'looked like he was pushed'."

Now I sat down. Just the thought of someone actually pushing sweet old Morty in front of a bus made me sick to my stomach. I stumbled through them to the sofa and sat heavily. The fact that Li was implying that I had been the one to push Morty dissolved into the ether. It was irrelevant at that time.

“Are you sure Mr. Yovanovicz was the only one who knew about your episodes?”

I nodded. “He was the only one who didn’t think I was crazy.”

“Is that why you were seeing Doctor Helena Mason?” My psychiatrist.

I nodded in answer to his question. It seemed that I was to be cursed with endless nodding.

“And when was your last visit with Dr. Mason?” Li had taken over the interview completely now. Winslow simply remained in the background, looking sympathetic.

This time I got to shake my head. I didn’t really remember. It had been a few weeks, not counting the time I had missed. That made a couple of months at least. I told him so.

“Can you account for your whereabouts on the 21st of December?”

I just looked up at him, stupefied by his total disregard for me. “No. I can’t. I skipped it.”

He must have found that an interesting choice of words because his eyebrows actually went up an eighth of an inch.

Winslow, seeing an opportunity, stepped in. “That was the day that Dr. Mason was killed.”

“What?! How?”

“Auto accident,” said Winslow.

“She was forced off the road,” Li added, looking at his partner. “Not much of an accident.”

In what seemed an all too familiar gesture of disbelief, I buried my face in my hands. And yet it wasn’t really disbelief. I was growing accustomed to the notion that the world was always changing. It changed around us all day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute. But I was missing the gradual progression of those changes. A person could die one day and give you the shock of your life. Multiply that by three over five weeks and you’ll have the fragile emotional state that was becoming my uncomfortable second skin.

“Mr. Cristian, are you planning to ‘skip’ anymore time in the near future?”

I looked up at Li, looked him directly in the eye. I had lost all inhibition. "You're an asshole."

He didn't respond. He simply found the door and left, Winslow now standing awkwardly by himself in my living room. With little grace, he fished a card out of his coat and dropped it on the coffee table. "Take care of yourself, Mr. Cristian." And then he was gone, too.

It's funny sometimes, how things work out. Losing my job put me into some financial stress. But with my mother passing, I was due a decent inheritance. Not a fortune by any stretch, but a few thousand dollars after splitting the whole thing with my brothers. I was very surprised when the check arrived in the mail a month later. In all of that time, my brothers and I had not spoken. I had twice tried to call Wyatt and once to call Jeremy. I did not even hear from Livvie.

I missed them.

Without them, and without my mother, and without Morty, I was very alone. I spent the first week in my apartment wishing for a leap. What else could I do? I was hoping to leap far into the future so that I could start a brand new life in a brand new world. But that was a fantasy, really. Even if I had the power to leap, I still did not have the power to stop it. My brand new life would end the next time I leaped and left that brand new world behind for an even newer one. Thus, my thoughts turned to suicide. I suppose it was just a simple step in the progression. As my life fell apart around me, I began to wonder what I was living for. It was a notion I soon dismissed, though. I did not want to die. I wanted still what I had always wanted. I wanted to find a comfortable and happy life.

I ate sparsely and slept long hours. I watched a lot of television and spent more and more time running into dead ends on the internet. I learned a lot though. I learned what it's like to live in the poorest regions in Africa. I learned about the crisis in the Middle East and sectarian genocide. I learned about a dog in Wisconsin that had saved an entire family from a burning house.

You can learn a lot in a week.

You can also become extremely bored.

I got another job. It was at a K-Mart bordering Union Square. I needed the income because I was afraid of using my mother's money, but I really just needed a schedule. I put the inheritance into a self-managing account that would earn some interest as it sat. It was a semi-liquid account. I couldn't tell if it would be enough but I figured it would

be there whenever I was. I could get retail or labor jobs at the drop of a hat, but I would probably lose each one. Whenever I disappeared (or, actually, reappeared), I would need money until I started earning some. That's where the account would come in. Maybe it wasn't much of a plan, but I had never been much of a planner.

The days and weeks blended into one another. There was very little for me to do, even less than before. At least I wasn't confined to a 5 day work schedule. I found myself asking for and taking more hours at the store. My days off were dark and dreary. It was the dead of winter. The cold crept out of the physical and into the emotional. Night fell early and the internet and television were poor company, even for someone who had grown accustomed to poor and no company. I tried just once to give a call to Livvie, but she did not pick up her cell phone and I did not leave a voice message.

The worst of February went by in the middle of the month and the weather began to brighten as March approached. It did a little bit to ease my spirits, but not much. There was no follow up from the police department, indicating that they had lost interest in me. I went to visit my mother's grave six times, each time praying that she would reach down from Heaven and bring me a solution to my problem. I wondered then if an end to the leaping would be an end to the problem. After all it had cost me I began to think it was all I had left.

On March 6th, at the end of a shift, I folded my K-Mart vest and stuck it into my K-Mart locker. Before I went, I felt like something sweet so I bought a candy bar with nuts and nougat. Sticking it into my pocket, I made for the exit. One of the checkout ladies, an older woman named Estelle (just like the receptionist at my old job), told me to button up because it was cold. She flashed me a kindly smile and I flashed her back my best imitation. I had seen her a few times while working. With all of the hours I worked, I had seen just about everyone that worked there. I was well regarded as the best employee and the worst company. As I stepped through the door and into the street, the world around me changed. The change was so fluid and sudden that I might not even have noticed it if the scenery wasn't so different. To begin with, it was warm. I immediately became uncomfortable inside of my coat. The dark air smelled of soot and garbage and something foul that I couldn't put my finger on. The pavement beneath my feet was not smooth and lined, but broken and crumbled. I stepped into the night and my foot twisted on a loose block of concrete and I went down. Silence was all

around. I pulled myself to my feet, relieved that I was uninjured, and took in my surroundings.

It was awful.

I noticed first the jungle jim in the park across the street. It was split in two, each piece bent away from the other as if a piledriver had come down on top of it and never stopped moving. The two parts were mangled and bent, melted. There had been trees in the park, too, but they were virtually gone. All that remained were burnt husks and piles of ash. Great chunks of the ground had come up from beneath to form concrete mountains the height of buses. And there were buses. And cars. Some were still on their decaying wheels while others lay on their backs like dying beetles. Everything was covered with this layer of black soot. Some of it had been streaked and there were finger writings in large patches. The buildings, too, were soiled as far up as I could see. While they still stood, great portions of them were severely damaged and there wasn't an unbroken window in view.

There were bodies, too.

Some were scorched beyond recognition, the flesh gone and the bones fused. Others were just old and decaying. Many showed signs of desecration. Not all of these people had been killed by whatever had caused this destruction. Just standing where I was, on the threshold of what had once been my place of work, I could identify people who had been shot, people who had been burned, people who had been bludgeoned. There was all manner of death around me.

I thought I must truly have died and gone to hell.

I thought this must be the culmination of my condition, to have been transported to a place that simply could not exist on Earth.

And then I knew that New York as I had known it had ceased to exist between March 6th, 2008 at around 6:00 pm and the time in which I stood at the moment. My concerns about where and how I would be able to live as I missed weeks and months of time were of no consequence now. Surely my apartment was buried under a heap of rubble. Surely my accounts were no longer viable. New York was gone. Perhaps the United States or even the world was gone as well.

Jeremy.

Wyatt.

Livvie...

Maybe Morty and my mother had been lucky to miss this.

Maybe I had been lucky, too.

Looking back at the entrance to K-Mart, I debated going back inside. I cannot deny a morose interest in seeing if I could identify any of the people inside. But my better and weaker nature provided ample resistance. The anonymous death around me was more than enough. I could not fathom seeing a familiar face on a ruined body.

In a last desperate attempt to make contact with someone, I pulled my cell phone from my pocket. There was no signal of course, but the date and time were printed on the glowing display. It was June 2nd, 2009. It was four in the morning. For a moment, the date didn't even faze me as I realized that its simple existence meant the cell satellite was still functioning. At least I knew there was civilization somewhere. As my harried psyche absorbed that bit of information I took in yet another bit. It was 2009. Not only had I skipped from Spring to Summer. I had skipped the entire year in between. For almost ten minutes, I stood in the devastation of Union Square, looking from my cell phone to the world around me, to the simplicity of the unchanged sky.

4:01.

4:02

4:03

...

For me it was six in the evening. In a few hours, when the morning was middle aged, I would be ready to get some sleep.

But there would be no place to lay my head.

I spent the dark hours wandering, shifting my coat from arm to arm. I wanted desperately to be rid of it, but couldn't bring myself to discard it. At first, I headed north toward my apartment. I must have walked twenty blocks before I remembered that it was likely not to have been my apartment any more. Additionally, I realized that I just didn't want to see it. Not really. After all, how would I react to the broken and burned body of my super if I were to see it?

No. Not for me. I decided again to allow the corpses to remain faceless.

The city around me was quiet but not dead. I could hear shouts in the distance and smell the smoke of fires wisping their way up out of the subway tunnels. Though I was desperate for human contact, I could not fathom venturing into those depths. Though it hadn't happened in years, the old subway cars used to lose their lights once in a while. It would only happen for a moment, but the riders would be enclosed in the darkness with nothing but the smoldering yellow of the track lights as illumination. During those times, people would let out exasperated

sighs and businessmen would look up from their papers, perturbed at the interruption of their reading. Then the lights would come back on and everything would return to normal. But that would not be so now. I knew that those tunnels would be black as pitch with just those fires to cast terrifying shadows.

Again, not for me.

1. I chose instead, an open door, letting myself slowly into the foyer.

Though the damage was extensive, I could still see remnants of its last occupation. The living room was narrow with two bookshelves flanking a TV stand. The TV was gone. The last vestiges of a brown and orange throw rug and a brown couch were littered about the room along with other debris. There was also a window that led to a fire escape, but it was broken. Letting myself into the bathroom, I saw cracked tile, gouged walls, and a toilet empty of water. Still, it had been several hours, and one year, since I'd had the opportunity to use the bathroom and old habits die hard. When I was finished, old habits prevailed as I tried to flush, but there was just an empty click. I left the bathroom, pulling the door shut (or as shut as it would shut) behind me. At last, I made my way to the bedroom. The furniture was in the same style as the living room, but what really caught my attention was the full sized bed and mattress that was dirty, but intact. There were no clean sheets or blankets. In fact, there were no sheets or blankets at all. The apartment had been cleaned out. I assumed by scavengers.

With nothing else for it and the low after an adrenaline high crushing my bones and muscles with fatigue, I lay my coat over the dirty mattress, crawled onto the bed, and fell quickly asleep.

I was awakened by the sound of helicopter blades in the distance. Upon opening my eyes, I was so disoriented that panic set in quickly. Where was I? Who was I? Frozen in fear, I could do nothing but lay there and listen to the roto roto roto of the chopper. It was getting closer.

As the memories came back, I began to relax a little. Truthfully, reality was not much comfort, but at least it was grounded. I rolled over, having taken my most comfortable position of sleeping on my stomach, and stared at the ceiling. The light had gone mostly from the room, day having faded into night. But there was light, a foreign light penetrating from the street below. Startled at this realization, I sat up and looked around. I was alone. It wasn't the helicopter, which still sounded far off, but a source, or several sources, from down below. The beams flashed through the broken window and bounced off the ceiling, temporarily illuminating the alien room.

Instinctively, I went to the window and looked out. It never occurred to me that this might be a bad idea. I just naturally assumed that whoever it was outside could help me. Down below was a unit of soldiers accompanied by three military vehicles. But I could see immediately that these were not American soldiers. The vehicles displayed a flag that I did not recognize and their uniforms were an urban grey. I caught a few spoken words, but none of them made any sense. Instinctively, I dropped back down under the window ledge.

"Did they see you?"

Startled, I turned to see a young girl crouching by the bedroom door. She was wearing dusty blue jeans and a tied off blouse with the sleeves ripped off. The jeans didn't look like they quite fit her. In fact, I was sure they were cut for a man. Her hair was tied back revealing a deep scar along her forehead and her skin was the color of chocolate powder. Beneath the grime and bruises, I couldn't tell much about her. She had a furtive look in her eyes that was set in odd juxtaposition with a pleading. She was a child, really, lost in this metropolitan Armageddon. I don't think she knew whether to trust me or to run.

"I don't know," I said.

"Well that was a stupid thing to do." The venom in her voice was clear and caught me off guard. She had that New York inner city teen accent and used expressions that I didn't understand nor do I remember well enough to transcribe. The accent made her accusation all the more forceful.

"I... didn't realize."

"You didn't realize? There hasn't been an American unit through here in weeks."

I didn't know what to say. The light began to fade from the room as the soldiers, apparently unaware of our presence, moved on. As they went, we just sat there staring at each other, she and I. She was sizing me up, I suppose. I couldn't imagine what she must have been through and I suppose she couldn't figure out who or what I was.

"Do you have any food?" she asked suddenly.

I sat frozen for a moment, wondering at this odd question, and then I remembered the candy bar. It was still in my pocket and, though it was somewhat melted and bent out of shape, it was still good. Gingerly, I stepped forward and held it out to her. She twitched and her right hand went to a knapsack that sat on the floor next to her. It was the first time I noticed it, a small silver thing, filthy, with strings for straps. It was like dealing with a timid animal. Would she bolt? But she had asked for the

food and I soon realized that it wasn't fear or mistrust that had stopped her up. It was the presence of a factory wrapped candy bar.

"Where did you get it?" she asked, as she studied it, almost completely disregarding my presence except as the person who can answer the question.

"I bought it," I answered because it was the truth.

She laughed. It was a funny little noise, tainted by her experiences. At one time, it must have been magical, a little tinkling sound that reverberated just inside one's ears. Not now, though. Not anymore.

"You're shitting me," she said, then began to examine me more closely. In fact, she got up from huddling in her safe spot by the door and approached me. Her expression evolved from one of disbelief to one of mistrust. "Who are you? You don't smell and your clothes are clean and not ripped. You've been outside the city, right? How did you get in and out?"

I didn't know how to answer these questions. I didn't even understand them. How could I explain to her the truth? Should I even try? I did try.

"My name is Mathew," I told her when I had finished spilling the sloppy contents of my story.

She sat there, dumbfounded, searching for the will to believe me and the truth if she didn't. Finally, she sat herself on the bed and tore open the candy bar. She looked at me once and then took a tentative bite. She smiled.

Two bites later, she offered me some, but I declined. She was Livvie's age. Correction. She was Livvie's age as I remembered Livvie. She was fifteen years old and her name was *Jennie with an ie*. I can't say that she accepted my story, but she sat with me for a while, waiting, I suppose, to see if the candy bar would make her sick. It didn't. I asked her to tell me what had happened and she did the best she could. As a New York City teen, she hadn't exactly been an avid follower of the political arena. Current events to her consisted of who had gotten pregnant and who had overdosed or been knifed in a gang fight.

As 2008 had worn through Spring and Summer, the effects of the assassination of Arab leader Abdelaziz began to spread across the globe. Even Jennie had heard of him and she remembered discussing it in class (although I was under the impression that she had not attended class very much). Her life and her world remained much the same, but she began to catch snatches of the news and the conversations of adults. She remembered hearing things about the President over extending himself,

fighting a war on three fronts, and the country having become a pariah in the world community (she actually did use the word *pariah* but she badly mispronounced it). The winter of 2008 was cold and dreary and led into a dark New Year. The United Arab Nation, under the leadership of a new and more aggressive man whose name Jennie could not remember, began to move troops overseas. They very quietly stole support from the United Nations and when they finally attacked the North East of the United States in February of 2009, the President was on his own in the world community with the majority of his troops overseas and his pants around his ankles.

I really didn't know what was going to happen after our meeting, but Jennie chose to stay with me for some time. Initially I asked her if there were any other people around. Of course, there were, but she travelled alone. She warned me never to trust anyone in a small group and to stay out of the subways. Every time we spoke about how to survive in New York City, it seemed as if she was preparing me for a grand mission. After each conversation, I expected her to slip off into the night, leaving her trainee to face the cruel city by himself. Yet she never did. For three weeks we travelled together, sleeping on the upper floors of those buildings that still held upper floors. Jennie usually liked to stick to the office buildings. They were cold and empty and there was little to be scavenged. That made them safe. The high floors were also safer because most people didn't like to climb the stairs, which could be unstable.

"If you're careful, it's okay, though," she explained.

The only time we went into apartment buildings was when we needed food or clothing. This, she explained, was what had brought her to me. Food was hard to find and often came in the form of mice and birds. *You got to whack 'em over the head and burn 'em up to kill all the diseases.* But we never cooked them where we found them. We always brought them deep into an office building where there were no windows or doors and suffered the smoke so we wouldn't be seen. Rain came down in spatters every couple of days and we collected it in tins that Jennie kept in her backpack. She came to me every night and slept close for comfort and protection, as a daughter does with a father. Before long, though she knew how to survive much better than I, I felt as if I was protecting her. After all, she was just a child, and I an adult.

She questioned me frequently, unable to truly comprehend what had brought me to that place and that time. I showed her my notebook and, much to my own surprise, I showed very little emotion over what I had lost. And yet, it touched her and I saw tears glistening on her cheeks for

the first time. Frantically, I searched the conversation for some terrible thing I might have said, but nothing came.

"I didn't realize," she said and her voice was much more tender than ever before. "I thought, you know, since you didn't live through it, you didn't lose anything."

Considering this, I nodded subtly. To be honest, the idea of losing my brothers and their families was a very abstract concept to me. For all I knew, they were alive and safe. They didn't live in the city and may have gotten out of the state. Any pain I felt still stemmed from the loss of my mother and Morty. I tried not to think of them too much because I still felt a tremendous amount of guilt associated with those two deaths.

"I was living with my grandma," Jennie said.

We were sitting very high up over the city, looking out over the destruction. The building we had found stood twenty two stories, with the top five completely blown off. A ragged pattern of concrete and girders jutted out toward the sky with the exposed seventeenth floor open to the sky. Most of it had collapsed and, really, the only safe place inside was down on fifteen. But, after finding a good place to sleep and cook our rats and pigeons, we had discovered a way to climb through the rubble. There was a stone platform high up that allowed us to see almost all the way downtown. We were approaching July and the air was still and hot down below, but up there was a sweet breeze which brought the scent of the sea with it from the east.

"When the bombs hit, we were sleeping. Of course they hit us at night. There was this huge boom and everything shook. Grandma went for the TV and we got a signal for a couple minutes until the power went out. There was this burnt guy on screen yelling about the 'first bomb attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor'. I don't know. It don't matter. The bombs got closer and we could hear breaking glass and falling buildings. My grandma grabbed me and we ran out of the house and down the stairs."

She paused, just looking out over the city. I suppose she was trying to put the facts together in her head because, as she began the story again, it seemed more real and more coherent.

"Everyone, all my neighbors, were in the halls and running down the steps. It was hard to see because half them had flashlights and they was pointing them in my eyes and all over. Grandma held my wrist and dragged me to the steps. I knew she was a tough woman; she raised me from a baby. But in the steps there was so many people. The Lopez's from upstairs was coming down. They had like ten little kids and

Grandma waited to let them all get through. It was the *right* thing to do.”

She was crying now and I knew how it would end, but I let her continue. I didn’t want to hear it, but I wouldn’t interrupt her. That she had chosen to share this with me meant so much.

“He pushed her. It was Bender, that stoner from 4C. He pushed her right into Mr. Lopez, who fell over three of his kids and they all fell down the stairs, over all the people in front of them, like a human avalanche. I didn’t fall because Grandma let go of me so I just stood there, looking at them. There must have been ten or fifteen people on the landing. They was all struggling to get up and Grandma was caught right in the middle.

“Mr. Lopez came up first, digging through the bodies for his kids. He was crying and screaming and Bender shot right past him with all the others who didn’t fall. They was just running *over* the people that did fall. Mr. Lopez fought them off, yelling, screaming, throwing his fists. But some kid from upstairs came around and kicked him in the nose and he went down so fast and he didn’t get up. I mean he *never* got up.

“I just stood there, looking at it ‘til the last of the people from upstairs ran past me and out the building. I could still hear the bombs and screams, but I couldn’t move. The people on the stairs, the ones who had fell, got themselves out now that they could and ran out. Mr. Lopez never moved. I saw one of his kids crawl out, look at her dad, and go on.”

She stopped talking then and just began to sob as the story played itself out in her head. Next to her, so close, I couldn’t do anything. Never had I felt so completely useless in my whole life. My heart was breaking for this child, my friend Jennie. So I just sat there with her, silent, waiting for her to get it out of her system. We sat for almost an hour while she composed herself. I imagined, with relief, that she was finished, but I was wrong. When the tears had gone and the sniffles had ceased, she began to speak again and I felt a captive audience. As much as I could hardly bear the images she projected, I would not ask her to stop. Telling the story was her choice to make and listening was my obligation.

“Grandma never called me nothing but *Child*. This is what I heard from the tangled people below. It was like a whisper and I knew it was Grandma calling for me. For a minute, I thought she was a ghost ‘cause I was sure she was dead. But, no, it was Grandma and she was the only one alive. There was still five or six people down there and they all

broke their necks or their backs and none of them was moving. Mr. Lopez lay over one of his other kids, bleeding all over him from the nose.

"I moved some people to get Grandma free, but she wasn't going nowhere. Both her legs was broke and maybe her head. She was hurting so bad.

"Why you still here, Child?" she said to me. What could I do?" Jennie looked at me, whispering, "Mathew, what could I do?"

I took her hand. "What did you do?"

"I kissed her face and waited for her to die. I couldn't leave her. She was my Grandma. I brought her water and some food. She took the water, but she wouldn't take no food. She wasn't really Grandma no more. I knew she was dead when she stopped taking the water. I didn't leave, though. The bombs had stopped a long time ago so I just stayed there with the dead people and the smell."

I waited a while for her to continue, but she didn't start talking again until I asked, "When did you leave?"

"Reesha came for me. She was with Devon and when they couldn't find me with all the people, they came back. They was good friends. We helped each other for a while, kind of like you and me."

"What happened to them?"

"They're gone," she said. "When the soldiers came into the city, people started breaking up and hiding. We did the same. We didn't see no one for a long time. Then we saw a group of guys and they was with these two girls and they looked *used*. You know what I mean? Devon took us away from them because he knew what would happen. They'd have killed him and used me and Reesha. So we left them.

"It didn't matter, though. We picked a bad place to sleep one night and another group caught us up. I'd gone to pee so I wasn't there when they came on Reesha and Devon. I saw them when I was coming back and I couldn't do nothing. There were five guys and one girl and they beat down on Devon like I never seen before. And Reesha... I just hid away until they was gone. They left Devon, but they took Reesha with them. *Of course they left Devon! He was dead!*"

She began to cry again, this time worse than before, and she didn't stop for a long time. I just sat there, feeling terrible, wishing I could do something to help her and knowing that I was powerless. It was a truly defining moment in my life. Never before had I been so needed by another person and so unable to do anything. Never before had I even noticed. Throughout my life, I had remained so detached, even from my own family. And now I understood why Martie disliked me so and my

nephews shunned me. I had always felt so much for Livvie because she had cared for me when no one else did, but now I didn't understand why. I was a freak! I recoiled at the thought of basic human emotional contact, a thing which is second nature to most people. Sniffling, scorn in her expression, Jennie finally looked up at me. It was as if she could read my mind because she stood up from where she was and began the slow climb back down the rubble hill.

I wanted to stop her from going, or at least follow her. I felt with certainty that this was the last I would see of her. As she climbed down she looked determined, not as if she was going back to the place we'd chosen to sleep, but as if she was going away. But I didn't follow her. In fact, I remained there, intentionally giving her every opportunity to leave me alone. I took a few minutes to add something to my journal, which I had been keeping less and less religiously. Then I sat by myself watching the city absorb the darkness until I dozed off and slept, very peacefully, with my head up against a piece of cinderblock.

It rained while I was asleep. It couldn't have been a heavy rain or a cold rain because I suppose it would have roused me. But when I awoke my clothing was wet and my beard, which had grown in over the past three weeks, smelled musty. I truly hated it. A wispy fog had settled over Manhattan and it took me a few moments to get my bearings. Even though I had been in the same position when I'd fallen asleep, I wasn't sure in which direction I was looking.

Though the silence was complete, I had a tingly feeling at the base of my spine. I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, but I knew that something was off. Feeling fear and terrible disorientation, I stared into the mist. I sat for a long time. The sky brightened, though only slightly. The sun was well and truly blocked by the low clouds that surrounded me. Then there was just the smallest noise. It was rock on rock, I knew that, and it could just as easily have been an animal as a person, but I knew that it was no animal. Though the sound had not been close, nor had it come from behind me, I could not pinpoint it and the fear came to me in a deluge. Squinting into the dimness, I saw a shape moving on the street below. I felt so exposed. Though I was eighteen stories up, I felt that this person, if he or she were to look up, would be able to see me and would be on me so quickly that there would be no chance of escape. It was ridiculous, of course, just the blind panic of a rabbit or squirrel. Regardless, I sat petrified, able only to stare at the shape as it made its way through the street.

It didn't take long for the shape to multiply. It was soon joined by many others, and they were moving quietly up and down in the morning's gloom. As more of them appeared my fear of them diminished rather than increased. They were not soldiers. Sightings of the enemy were infrequent, but most nights we could hear the helicopters and the gunshots. When we saw them they always moved in formation and there were always vehicles. But that was not the case here. Even at such a height I could see that there were both men and women, moving with a defined purpose, but in no particular arrangement. They helped each other through the tough spots while larger ones stayed to the front and sides to keep everyone corralled together. Small forms huddled close to the large ones and I knew that there were children as well. *Children!* I watched them for a while, allowing my composure to sink back into my consciousness. When finally I felt that my legs would not wobble under my weight, I stood up and began the slow climb down the hill.

I hadn't a clearly defined plan until I saw that Jennie had not left. She lay sleeping on the floor in the spot we had decided was safe. For the briefest of moments, I considered leaving her there, thinking that it was what she would want. I believed completely that she had stuck to that spot out of a stubborn desire to keep it from me. What right had I to it? Then I was beside her, gently shaking her, for I had found that her presence had filled out my thoughts and ideas. That she was there made me realize what losing her had meant.

She opened her eyes, dazed, and looked up at me. What I saw in her eyes shocked me.

"Mathew," she said softly, sounding more like a woman and less like a child than I had ever heard. "You didn't leave."

Me? Leave? Had she thought...?

"There are people on the street," I said.

Her pupils widened ever so slightly, just enough to convey terror.

"No," I said, taking her hand. "A lot of them. Women and children, too."

"Children?" she asked.

"Lots of them." I smiled.

Together, hand in hand, we hurried down the stairs, Jennie pulling me along at her quicker pace. We burst into the street like two children desperate to catch the ice cream truck. Stopping, I fought to get my bearings. Where had I seen them? Where would they be now?

"Hello?" I called out. "Are you there?"

Jennie looked at me and I wasn't sure she approved. I called out again anyway.

"Shhh!" came a hiss from the shadows.

We stopped dead and looked around. It could have come from anywhere. On the street is where someone was truly vulnerable. Between all of the burnt out buildings and wreckage there were innumerable places to hide. For the patient, and ambush was as easy to set up as was a place setting at the dinner table.

"Where are you?" I called out.

"I said shut up!"

"Then come out," I called, feeling bold. Jennie held my hand so tightly that I felt it begin to prickle from lack of blood.

From the left there came movement and a man stepped out of ruined coffee shop. He was a thin man, tall and wispy, with wild hair and grey stubble on his cheeks. His fingernails were too long and there was dirt underneath them, but he looked healthy and strong enough and I did not doubt that he had companions in the shadows. He looked around, searching for something.

"We're alone," I said to him and Jennie squeezed my hand very tightly.

"You're a damned idiot," he replied. "What are you thinking, shouting into the middle of the street?"

"I saw you," I replied. "All of you. And we're all alone."

He seemed troubled and, for a moment, I wondered if I hadn't stumbled across a loner by chance. Perhaps even now the larger group that I had spotted was moving off like the slow trickle of a curbside river.

Slowly, like a timid cat expecting food, he moved out of the shop. Looking both left and right, he performed a halting advance. He stopped when he was close enough so that we could smell him. Or he could smell us.

"All of you'?" he quoted. "All of who?"

But a sense of relief washed over me as I realized for sure that he was lying. I pointed to the building from which we had just come out. I pointed up to the shelf of concrete, just visible eighteen storied up in the gloom. "From up there," I said.

He looked up. I guess he was trying to figure out whether or not I was lying. He didn't know what to make of us and I couldn't blame him. I wouldn't have known what to make of us either.

"Where are you going?" I asked him. "All of you."

He didn't say anything, still unsure. But there were just two of us and, I suppose, he decided that there was little danger. Turning away from us, he beckoned that we follow. Jennie hesitated, but I tugged her gently, not daring to let go.

The filthy man led us back into the coffee shop, treading over broken tables and chairs with ease, moving behind the counter and into the back room. Although shielded from the outside blasts, the room was in no better shape than the room up front. It had been looted for sure. The refrigerators were open and some toppled. There wasn't a crumb to be found, but there were a number of empty packages. Anything of value was gone and the rest was simply scattered junk. I found it all amazing, but the man had seen it a thousand times before. Even Jennie seemed uninterested in what had become familiar surroundings. We moved through quickly and descended into the basement via a set of emergency stairs.

Once below, darkness became the rule. There were people hidden in the folds of obscurity. I could hear them even though I could not see them. They were inept at hiding themselves or I certainly would have had no idea they were there. Shortly, a second man stepped forward. He was much bigger than the first and his beard was tight and black.

"Did you search them?" he asked.

The wispy man didn't answer, his expression showing his shame. "They're definitely American. I didn't..."

The larger man brushed the smaller aside, uninterested in his explanation. He came up close to us and I could smell him. He had a musty smell, like he spent a lot of time underground. I could see the bits of moisture clinging to his beard. Only then, with him so close, could I discern his Asian features and identify him.

"Detective Li?" I asked.

He seemed taken aback, which was the first time I had seen him thus. During our one meeting, he had been callous and imperturbable. Now, though, as not to be shown up, he was staring hard into my eyes. I could picture his mind's eye cleaning me up, stripping my beard, changing my clothing, the style... He was trying to place me and I was sure he would be successful.

"Cristian," he said. "The time traveler."

Now I was taken aback. When told, my time travelling or, more to the point, skipping was something to be dismissed as lunacy. I suppose in the law enforcement profession lunacy is recorded and filed away for later use.

"Mathew Cristian," I told him. "This is Jennie."

"With an *ie*," she added.

1. Turning back to the wispy man, he said, "They're okay." And he walked away.

Looking over his shoulder, the wispy man reemerged. "It'll be about forty five minutes before we can get moving again. We got to hole up in case someone out there heard you yelling. If you follow this passage to the back of the group, someone will give you something to eat."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Out, of course."

"Out?"

"Out of the city."

Jennie knitted her brow. "How's that?"

The wispy man seemed to consider his answer for a moment, then shrugged. "Warren knows how to go. That way if any of us is caught by the Arabs, they can't tell no one where we went."

Now that my eyes had adjusted to the darkness, I could see that it was not absolute. There were glowing spots all down the passage indicated by the wispy man. Since he deemed it unnecessary to pay us any more attention, we turned away from him and started to follow the lights. As we moved down the passage, we studied the faces floating in the glow of the small lights. They all looked the same, all like Jennie. Some held a spark of hope, as if Warren Li, former NYPD Detective really knew what he was doing when he said he was taking them out of the city. Others were just as hopeless as ever. The lights they carried came from candles and reading lights with fading batteries. There were one or two flashlights that showed up brightly when we turned a corner. Other than that, though, it was a pretty dreary world.

As we reached the last of the people, and there must have been close to a hundred people, they thinned out. Here at the end, people sat apart, each munching on something or other. There was a man sitting with a woman and each seemed responsible for two large rucksacks. They were going through the packs carefully, counting on their fingers as they went. Apparently, these were the grocers.

They looked up at us as we approached, the man smiling, the woman clearly involved in doing some internal calculations.

"Newcomers!" the man announced, as if we were the first he'd ever seen and it delighted him. "I guess you're the reason we've stopped."

I nodded, bemused.

He extended a dirty hand. "Daniel Tiri. This is my wife, Lydia."

I introduced myself and Jennie.

"Have a bottle," he said, pulling out a twenty ounce bottle of spring water from the pack. "You'll have to share."

"That's fine," I said. "Thank you."

He waved me off. "It's all Warren's anyway. He just put us in charge."

I looked at the handful of visible people. "How long have you been wandering the city?"

He laughed. "We don't wander. Warren lays out a trip on the map and we follow the course."

"How long does that take?" asked Jennie.

Tiri shrugged. "Two or three weeks, usually."

"Usually?"

He nodded again. "We make a circuit, picking up as many stragglers as we can along the way. Once we get back to where we started, we push everyone out the door. Then we start planning the next circuit."

I was impressed. I asked how many times they had succeeded.

He thought about that a moment, muttering about which circuit had included Felix. He couldn't seem to remember whether it had been the last one or the one before that. Ultimately, he began to sound like a broken record and his wife chimed in with the answer. It was four circuits.

Tiri was a talker and we sat and munched on some crackers and dried meat as he told us about Warren Li. After the invasion, the detective had found a way out of the city and started setting up a network to ferry refugees to safety. The stories surrounding Li's initial escape were many and varied. As with all heroes, they ranged from the likely to the ridiculous. There was one in which Li was standing on a pillar of the docks at the Staten Island Ferry with nothing but a broken baseball bat and a whipcord of leather. Hordes of soldiers were shooting at him (and missing) while he fended off the rush. Ultimately, he dove into the river and escaped. In another version of the story he had only the whipcord. After all, he could hardly hold the baseball bat with a baby in his arms.

"I've seen Warren do some amazing things, though," Tiri told us. "He started the first circuit all by himself and picked up me and Lydia early on. It's tough to get people to trust you when you're a small group. That's how the street gangs travel. We ran into a couple of those, but Warren took care of it." He didn't elaborate. As people latched on, Li had taken care to evaluate who would be useful circuit to circuit. There were seven in the group now and Tiri was pretty sure that that would be

it. Too many people would be too hard to control. As Tiri put it, Warren wanted a small crew and a large herd.

Tiri spoke to us for most of forty minutes before a lanky woman came forward and whispered something to him.

"Time to go," Tiri announced.

We backed away. For most of the time, Jennie and I had remained silent. We hadn't needed to question Tiri in order to get the information we got and Jennie was mostly disinterested. Now we watched as the people around us began to stow their meager possessions in small bags. Children found their ways to adults. Adults found their children. Tiri and the lanky woman kept to the rear in order to make sure that no one stayed behind.

We marched back along the same passage and, eventually, emerged into the coffee shop. I could see Li out front, blazing the trail through the debris. He stuck close to the buildings and moved quickly and with purpose. His eyes were everywhere and I imagine his ears were pricked up to the slightest sound. How long, I wondered, did it take to get one hundred people off of the street and into the basement of a coffee shop?

Only as long as it took two people to run down eighteen flights of stairs.

Once out into the light, Jennie grabbed my arm with a hiss.

I stopped and looked at her, suddenly panicked. She was pointing further up the line and her face was a portrait of rage and hate. The man she was pointing to, and her finger continued to move as he did, was very average. Stooped as he was trying to get over the mounds of rubble, it was difficult to tell his height, but he was no taller than I am. He seemed young and old at the same time, so I presumed young with life in the besieged city having taken its toll on him. When people are dirty and mangy it's difficult to tell their ages. Like all of the other men, he wore a beard. But it had grown in patches, betraying youth. He had shifty eyes.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Shhh," Tiri warned from behind us. "On the street, we keep quiet."

But Jennie would not be silenced. "He was one of the guys that beat down on Devon and took Reesha."

I stopped in my tracks. "Are you sure?"

"I saw all of them," she said. "I'll never forget their ugly faces."

"Keep moving," Tiri whispered.

Jennie had stopped, too, and was looking around. It only took a moment before she found a piece of pipe and had it in her hands.

"Jennie," I hissed.

She broke ranks and started moving forward. She did nothing to conceal her actions and she made a lot of noise. There was this barely audible sound issuing from her throat that sounded both animalistic and terrifying. Noticing the oddity, Li stopped and turned. He held up his hands to halt the line and began to make his way back, throwing a glance at Tiri. There was no doubt about Jennie's intentions although I'm not sure Li had picked out her target. As I watched him approach her, I thought I could interpret his intentions and I did not like them. Quickly, I moved to intercept. But Jennie hardly needed my help.

"You stay back, cop," she called across the street and now everyone was aware of the event.

He stopped in place, a rabbit's look on his face, and scanned the sky and the street. Then the rabbit turned to a jackal and he made several short signals. Instantly, the Tiris, the wispy man, the lanky woman, a large black man with a badly burned face, and a boy who couldn't have been any older than fourteen got out of the line and began to usher everyone into the nearest building. Apparently, he took no chances with being caught out in the open. Even though a hundred people were easily visible on the street, loud voices most likely rang out for blocks and blocks in the dead and silent metropolis.

"Hey!" Jennie shouted, her voice reverberating off of the empty buildings. The man she had identified as her target was moving with the crowd. I was amazed at the efficiency with which Li's agents were able to traffic all of those people off of the street. It was a testament to their skill because the people themselves were obviously untrained. Tiri's use of the word *herd* had been extremely accurate.

No one acknowledged her outburst, but she had cleared the worst of the street rubbish now, climbed atop a pile of wreckage, and got right in his way. He tried to move past her very casually, as if he believed she had put herself in his way by mistake. But she cut him off again.

"I'm talking to you, raper!"

What I saw in his eyes was a quick switch from passiveness to instinctive wrath and then back to forced confusion. Li was four steps away and I was five.

Jennie brandished the pipe and, to me, looked as if beating the pulp out of someone with it was not something she hadn't done before.

"Before I beat on you, you tell me what happened to Reesha."

In his defense, the poor man looked genuinely confused at the mention of Jennie's friend's name. By now, the street was almost empty. It

was Jennie and the man and me and Li. The wispy man clung to the entrance of an office building, not only waiting for his own exit, but making it clear to onlookers where he had taken the group.

"*Reesha!*" Jennie screamed at the boy. "You beat on Devon and you took Reesha!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, but for a flicker of an instant the truth shone in his eyes. He remembered. Maybe he had learned her name before...

"Where is she, you pig?"

"I don't..."

"*Where?!*" When Jennie swung the pipe it was with expert precision. It collided with the tip of his left shoulder bone making a cross between a *clank* and a *crack*. Tears practically leaped from his eyes and he went to his knees screaming obscenities.

Li rushed forward and grabbed Jennie around the waist with one great arm, taking the pipe from her with the other hand. Though she struggled, her ninety plus pounds were no match for his strength. He tossed her aside like a piece of litter and she half fell, half scabbled down a hill of rubble. At the sight, I rushed forward. I was going for Li, but the gang man was already on his feet, his injured arm dangling at his side, but his other hand curled into a fist. He had come down the hill on the other side and was moving toward her. The look in his eyes was venom and I grew very afraid. Clumsily, I changed direction and almost toppled as I came down the side of the hill. He didn't even notice me until I crashed into him and the two of us tumbled into the street getting scraped and bruised by broken stones and glass. As I tried to regain my footing, I noticed that no one had gone into any basement. Through the gaping holes and windows, all of the people in the group had stayed to watch.

"*Killer!*" Jennie's fury had not lessened. She had found a second length of pipe, this one shorter than the first and jagged on one end. It would probably have not been as effective a swinging weapon, but it would have been an effective weapon just the same. Her advance, though, was halted by Li who stepped into her way.

"Get out of my way, cop," she ordered, holding the pipe up.

"We don't do this here," Li said. "Take it up with the police when we get out."

I could almost feel her skepticism. She was fifteen years old and she had no evidence against him. No one was going to listen to her word. He would walk away. I wonder if Li thought she was going to give in

because her muscles did relax. But if he did, he misread her intentions. Loosening up her body, she quickly sidestepped him and threw the pipe straight at the gang man. Again, I was amazed at her precision because the pipe flew end over end and smacked him right in the temple with a potato chip crunch.

His eyes rolled into his head and he dropped to the street.

This was the only time in my life that I ever experienced what I would describe as the collective gasp. I had read about it in books and seen it in movies, but I never thought it was possible in reality. Everyone watching had exactly the same reaction and the breath that left their mouths was identical.

Sparing just one insolent look for Li, Jennie marched over to the fallen man and looked down on him. She toed him with her worn shoe just to make sure and then she spat on his dead face.

"Who's the murderer now?" Li asked. He signaled once again to his crew and they began bringing everyone out of hiding. "Don't follow us," he said to Jennie.

I stood there as it happened, watching the crowd pass by the scene, every person trying to get a look. As if they hadn't seen enough death in the previous months. When the last person had gone by, Jennie turned and began to march off in the other direction. I stood and watched. I watched Li go one way and Jennie go the other way.

And I stood.

"Cristian," Li called back. I looked up at him. "Are you coming?"

I shook my head.

He seemed perturbed, but turned away just the same. He certainly wasn't going to beg.

I turned to look back at Jennie and saw that she had stopped in the street. She was still turned away from me, away from everything. Her head was down and she looked as if she needed to fall down. With one last glimpse at the group of people disappearing behind wreckage and around a corner, I went to Jennie and put a hand on her shoulder. When she turned there were tears in her eyes and a defiant twitch at the corner of her mouth.

"I'm not sorry," she said.

"I didn't ask you to be," I replied.

Then she collapsed into my arms, buried her face into my chest, and sobbed out all of her grief.

That night she came to me, not as a child, but as a woman. We had decided to sleep where we slept the night before, but chosen not to sit on

the stone shelf that was the eighteenth floor. At first, I thought she was simply curling up next to me the way she had in the past. We always slept close, maybe for protection, maybe for comfort. But as she slowly began to kiss my face and rub the back of my head, I understood the difference.

I was graceless as I panicked and pulled away. I offended her.

"What?" she shouted, much like the child she was. "Why not?"

I made a face. But the *why not* was not as simple as it seemed.

Throwing her arms into the air, she stood and stalked away. Then she calmed, the maturity she had displayed those past weeks returning. "Things ain't the same," she said. "I'm not a kid."

She was right of course. She had seen too much and had to survive on her own for too long to be a child any longer. And I didn't think of her as a child. She was too much my companion, wholly my equal if not my better. Yet something stopped me. I'm not sure what it was because I think I loved her, even then, even with the distance in our age and our lives. I think I realized it when I had awakened that morning and felt that she was gone. The feeling that had replaced her had been one akin to the feeling of losing Livvie after abandoning her at the train station. Akin, but not the same. This had been stronger, more painful.

But I remained steadfast, unwilling to fight the growing fear that a physical relationship would damage something that had become so vital to me. My heart beat in my chest as adrenaline pumped into my veins. The terror was so real that I couldn't even hope to fight it. I could not explain this to her. It would have sounded empty and false. No matter what I said, she would have believed that I looked at her only as a child. For the second night in a row, she slept away from me.

And the next morning I was gone.

I awakened in the same building, with Jennie sleeping a few feet away. I looked at her with what must have been longing, wondering if my decision of the previous evening had been the right one. Stretching, I moved out of sight so that I could relieve myself. Suddenly I was surrounded by the sounds of heavy machinery and loud voices and saw that I was urinating on a half-finished wooden floor. I remember thinking that I would never go to the bathroom again, because I was dreadfully embarrassed and then frightened as rough hands grabbed me by the shoulders and hauled me backwards. It was all I could do to zip up my pants.

The men who grabbed me were clearly of Middle Eastern descent. They wore yellow construction helmets and angry scowls. They began

shouting at me in a language I didn't understand and several signaled to others a short distance away. It was difficult for me to get my bearings. They were shoving me and turning me around. Hands groped at my clothing and I felt my wallet, phone, and journal stripped away. I was pushed up against a wall and, though the smell of paint and dust was strong, I couldn't focus on any of the visual details except the men shouting, now at each other, and gesturing toward me.

Finally, one man spoke to me. He was a heavy man, bearded, with dark skin. I couldn't understand what he was saying, but he raised two leathery hands and made himself clear with a gesture. I was to stay put. So I did.

I was still on the fifteenth floor of the same building in which Jennie and I had spent two nights. It was daylight now, instead of dawn. The hot air of late June had been replaced by cooler air. The sun shone high above and the weather was nice, but it felt like fall. For an instant, hope blossomed. If I had only skipped a month or two, then perhaps finding Jennie was not an insurmountable task. Of course, if I had only skipped a month or two then I doubt the progress that had been made would have been made. Though the building was under heavy construction, the rooms empty, some of the walls exposed while wiring was being repaired, it did not compare to the rest of Manhattan. Stealing a glance out the large windows I could see that almost every building in view was swarming with workers. There were black drapes over some buildings, but most were in current progress. Some were even complete. Through their windows, I could see people going about office business. The streets below were clean and repaired. Though traffic was light, there was traffic.

Three men in uniform appeared and came forward, pushing their way through the throng of workers that had gathered to watch me. I did not recognize the uniform. One of them, clearly the leader, also began speaking to me in that incomprehensible language.

"I don't understand," I said.

"Ah," he replied. "English. You are American. I could not tell under all of that filth."

It was a great joke. A couple of the men laughed, betraying their understanding of English. I said nothing.

"Where did you come from?" he asked, completely ignoring the chuckles behind him.

"I don't know," I replied simply, it being both the truth and a lie at the same time.

“Do you understand that you are on United Arab soil and, therefore, suspect of espionage?”

“What day is it?” I asked quietly.

This seemed to take him by surprise but his recovery was quick. “You will be taken to a police house.”

He said nothing else. A single gesture had the other two men grabbing me by the arms and hauling me forward. As I passed through the work areas, I could see that really only a few of them were Arab. Most of the workers were American. They looked healthy, but sad, these men and women. My appearance was like a wave as I was taken through the rooms. People stopped work as soon as I came through and turned to see me.

“He looks like a refugee,” one woman whispered. The man next to her responded with a sound of disbelief.

We stopped in front of a bank of elevators and waited for one to arrive. The men in uniform were armed and they kept their hands very close to their guns. I couldn’t decide whether it was I who caused them concern or they just kept a natural state of readiness. We moved into an elevator that smelled of wood polish and rode down to the street without incident. I was then ushered through a grand lobby and into the street, where a police van was waiting for me. They shoved me into the dark rear and locked the door behind me. It occurred to me that I had not been handcuffed.

I was able to look out the back of the van as they drove me downtown. It was certainly Manhattan, but not the Manhattan I remembered. Most of the structures that had survived the invasion had been repaired, but there were many others that had been replaced. All of the new ones displayed signs of Middle Eastern architecture. The lettering on most of the shops and signs was Arabic. There was some English, but most of it took the form of rules and warnings. To be American in New York was to be clearly second class. Once again, I wondered how much of my world was gone. Did the United States even exist anymore? Previously, as I had wandered the city with Jennie, I had learned very little.

I was taken to what I would describe as a precinct house. I had never been inside of a police station before so I don’t know how this one compared with others. It certainly looked different than the ones I had always seen on television. The flooring in the lobby was white marble and there seemed to be a man constantly cleaning it, an American man. There were several large desks which allowed their occupants to tower over anyone who approached. High above, great chandeliers added to

the sunlight that beamed in through the windows. We ignored and were ignored by the workers in the building, my guards escorting me straight to the rear and into a long corridor. Using stairs this time, I was ushered downstairs where I was stripped of my clothing and showered. They then shaved my beard and buzzed my head. Despite the fact that none of it was voluntary, it felt good to be clean and groomed. I was handed a pair of loose grey pants and a blue T-shirt.

“Are you hungry?” the lead man asked before locking me into a cell.

I nodded.

Several minutes later, I was brought a tray of beef and vegetables with a short loaf of hard bread and a pitcher of water. The food was good, the meat and vegetables of much higher quality than I would have expected. Of course, I hadn’t eaten anything like it in several weeks so it was possible that my perception was skewed.

It was several hours before someone came for me. The man who took me from the cell was different from the man who had brought me there. He didn’t speak at all and I wasn’t sure that he understood English. I was led back up the stairs and onto the main level. We only passed the grand lobby, but I could see that the sun had set and the true effect of the lighting of the chandeliers. If it wasn’t a police station, it would have been beautiful. I saw no other prisoners. In fact, it seemed that I was the spectacle of the hour as all eyes turned to look at me. Once again in an elevator, I was taken to the seventh floor where I was marched through a group of cubicles, once again to be ogled by Arab office workers, and deposited into an office.

The office was small, but had a nice view of the street. The street lights were lit and there was moderate foot traffic. But I couldn’t really look at it for very long without being overcome by this terrible sense of loneliness. I felt so far away from home, years and years from everything I had known. The clock on the desk read 7:22.

The door behind me opened and a man entered the room. He was a young man, probably five or six years younger than I was, and he wore an expensive black suit with tiny little pinstripes. He was carrying my wallet, my phone, and my notebook. His name was Samud.

“You have not kept up your journal,” he said to me.

“I lost bits of time,” I explained while explaining nothing.

He nodded skeptically. “Five years is a large bit to lose.”

I didn’t react. It was not surprising. Five years. Jennie was five years gone.

"Please sit." Samud offered me the chair opposite the window and took his own behind the desk. I took the seat, my heart growing cold.

"I apologize for taking so long to see you, but it was very difficult tracing you. Your identity matches the identity of a man who was reported missing more than six years ago. You were last seen at your place of employment..."

"K-mart," I said sadly.

"Yes," he said both surprised and delighted at my knowing that. "This matches an entry in your journal. I am also familiar with the man Warren Li that you mention in later entries. Quite a hero among your people. He brought over one thousand refugees out of Arab occupied territory and into what remains of the United States before he was killed."

And just like that I started to cry. My head dropped into my hands and the tears came. I don't suppose I cared so much about Li, but hearing that he had died was too much for me. The faces of all of the people I had seen in that short time flashed before my eyes. The Tiris, the wispy man, the gang man who Jennie had...

Jennie.

Jennie.

Jennie.

Samud's hand fell on my shoulder and he shoved a soft tissue into my hands. "Please, my friend. No one here will harm you."

I looked up at him, struggling to regain my composure. It seemed a very long time since I had been afraid for myself.

"It's 2014?" I asked.

He nodded. "I would normally disbelieve the assertions made in your journal. This time skipping power..."

"It's not a *power*," I corrected. "It's something that happens to me, not something that I do."

"Of course," he acquiesced. "However, the circumstantial evidence would seem to support you."

I sensed a trap. "What evidence?"

"The annexation of North America's north east has been complete for almost four years. All of what was once New England as well as New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and parts of Maryland have become territories of the United Arab Nation. For many months, our soldiers rounded up American refugees, but there has not been one seen since the very end of 2012. In addition, the dates of your journal entries and the

major events listed in those entries seem to correspond with your time lapses.”

“Then you believe me?”

He shrugged and took himself back behind his desk. “I do not disbelieve you.” He passed over a piece of paper. I took it and looked at it. It was a print out of an old news article from England. The pilot of a British jet insisted that his co-pilot had disappeared for just a second, and then reappeared. The description of the incident reminded me very much of my first experience, with the spilled coffee. I handed the paper back to Samud.

“You see,” he said. “There are many of these articles, describing people disappearing and other such incidents which allude to your condition in others.”

“Can you help me?” I asked, showing perhaps a bit too much desperation.

He shook his head. “Unfortunately, it would be impossible for me to bring this to my government for research. I would be laughed out of my position. However, I have some friends who may be interested in doing some research while we put up the appearance of integrating you in as a regular refugee.”

“How do we do that?”

“Under the treaty signed by our two governments, no United States citizen is to be held in United Arab territory for any length of time in excess of the time it takes for his government to receive him.”

Shaking my head, I began to laugh a little. “What does that mean?”

He smiled at me. “It means that you will be added to a manifest immediately. Your government receives manifests at irregular intervals, depending on how long it takes to process the previous manifest.”

“How long is that?”

“It varies, depending on the people. First, your government has to do an identity check for every name on the list; they don’t want to admit spies or terrorists. Once they’ve cleared all the names, the manifest is placed into a queue for delivery. Upon delivery, the United States does whatever it does with the manifest and the people on it. It can take years to clear a new manifest. As you may have noticed, there are still thousands of United States Citizens in United Arab territory. Since there has not been a new refugee for some time, I have added your name to the last manifest, which is almost twenty months old. It will not clear for some time.”

“And what do I do until then?”

“We will have to conduct our research in secret. You will have to appear as a transfer from one unit to another. As soon as we can insert you into a new unit, you will work just like everyone else.”

Chapter 3

In 2009, when I had been roaming the city of New York with Jennie, the United States was trying desperately to hold its borders in Pennsylvania, Upstate New York, Virginia, and even further down south. There were Arab troops moving into Florida. Resources were so low that police and private security firms were enlisted to aid in the fight. Meanwhile, the bulk of the army was trapped overseas fighting in Iraq, Iran, and Israel (the three Is). United States forces held out just long enough for the recalled troops to make their way home and save the deep South. The United Arab Nation was contained and held to the northeast. Peace talks began.

While all of this was going on, Arab troops were also rounding up American citizens caught in the invaded territories and placing them into internment camps. There were some twelve million of these refugees when all was said and done. As treaties began to get written, the Arab Nation collected information on the refugees and released that information to the United States officials. Thus began the counting and collating of the captured and dead. Sadly, instead of demanding the immediate release of its citizens, the U.S. chose instead to carefully analyze the data, leaving parts of families stuck over the border with no information and no hope. What made matters worse was that the outraged families were no match for the throng of frightened citizens who wanted everyone admitted back into the country medically and psychologically screened. Those wily terrorists would stop at nothing to get their spies into the country, even if they had to brainwash its citizens. As a result, the treaty was amended to include the concept of the Refugee Manifest.

A Refugee Manifest could hold as many as fifty names or as few as twenty. Basically, the United Arab Nation was to submit individual manifests to the U.S. for processing and clearance. Once the U.S. government had exhaustively checked every name on the list and made preparations for return, the manifest would be cleared and the people whose names were on it could be transferred over the border. This process happened within a few weeks at the beginning, but the United States

became quickly overwhelmed with the enormity of the task and it lost priority to other issues. In the meantime, the Arab Nation had to feed and shelter these people, so they demanded financial remuneration. The U.S., petrified of receiving spies and terrorists, quickly acquiesced. Funds were allocated and refugees were soon living on the dime of the American taxpayer.

After several months, the U.A.N. decided to rebuild and settle those areas that had been devastated by the invasion. Though many workers came from their home countries in the Middle East, the refugees were broken up into work units consisting of forty people per unit. It wasn't bad work, really. The people were given decent housing, clothing, and food in exchange for the work. They were also trained to do things that most of them had never done. People with medical experience were held aside to work with Arab doctors and the refugees were integrated into society, albeit at a low social level.

Samud wanted to keep me close by so that I could meet regularly with a Doctor Abdel Miktoffin. Miktoffin was one of the *friends* of which he had spoken. Apparently, this man had been tracking people with my syndrome for several years and had collected an embarrassing and paltry amount of information. He was hoping a "live subject" would open some doors for him. I smelled personal ambition and resolved to be on my guard for the duration of our relationship. Guile was something foreign to me, but I was adapting quickly to a growing need for it.

So my work unit was downtown. We were placed in apartment buildings that were converted office buildings. They were close to what had been the South Street Seaport. I could smell the sea air when I was dropped off. There was some commotion as I arrived. Apparently, the building housed six work units, and the Arab government had chosen midnight as a good time to pull people from a cleared manifest. The lobby of the building was crowded with people, both Arab and American. Several official looking people were attempting to organize a short group of Americans into a line and check off their identities on a clipboard. We were forced to wait outside for an hour while it all took place. Finally they began moving the procession out the doors to the waiting bus, a converted school bus. I was exhausted by then and eager to accept whatever bed they might offer me. But I could not help but stare at the faces of the people getting onto the bus. Despite the fact that they were obviously being released back into the United States, I saw

nothing but despondent stares. I felt sorry for them, wondering what their journey would be like.

And then I saw Jennie.

She was five years older, a little taller and a little more filled out, but it was definitely her. And, in case I needed any more convincing, she looked up when I called her name. She couldn't initially identify the direction of my voice so she began to look around. I called out again and stepped away from my guards. This, they did not like. Dragging me backwards, they hauled me toward the entrance of the building. It was now clear of people and they seemed eager to keep me away from the people being moved out.

I called to her again. And again. I did not stop calling her name and I did not stop struggling against my captors. Finally, her eyes found me and she looked confused for a moment. Of course, I was clean and shaved and it had been five years for her. I would have given her my name, but her confusion was momentary. She said my name aloud and, though it was phrased as a question, I knew that she knew who I was. Then she jumped out of the line and started toward me. For whatever they used to restrain me, they doubled their efforts with Jennie. Five years older and five years stronger was she, moreso for the difficult work she had been doing. But it wasn't enough. They forced her onto the bus and made sure she stayed in her seat while she pounded on the window and silently called out to me. The last I saw of her as I was dragged inside was the eerie portrait of her face in the dirty window.

"But I need to see her," I cried out. "Let me go."

It was no use. They did not understand me and probably would not have cared if they did. They railroaded me into an elevator and we rode up six floors to my new home.

I did not begin work the next day. I was in no condition to work, having had a late night to begin with and being unable to sleep at all after seeing Jennie, and Samud had yet to formally place me into a unit. He came to see me that afternoon and found me a glum and miserable companion.

"Something is troubling you, my friend," he said over a private lunch.

"Do you have a pen?" I asked.

He seemed confused, but was willing to play along. He removed a pen from his breast pocket and handed it over. Taking a clean napkin, I wrote down several names.

Wyatt Cristian

Jeremy Cristian

Martha Cristian

Olivia Cristian

Devin Cristian

Jack Cristian

Jennie

I handed it back to him and he read the list.

"Jennie?" he asked. "There must be several thousand Jennifers..."

"With an *ie*," I told him. "It's not common."

"But it may not be that way in her records."

"Then check last night's manifest."

"Excuse me?"

"She was on that bus. Your guards wouldn't let me get to her."

He looked down at the list again. He did not attempt to address my anger at having been kept separate from her. He promised to find out all he could and pass the information on to me. As we finished eating, he informed me that I would begin work the next day.

I was roused at five the next morning. I had gone to bed early the night before. The apartments were small but adequate. Privacy was apparently not a priority because there were no locks on the doors. There was closet space for clothing and a bookshelf for books, although mine was empty. There was a private bathroom, but no kitchen. I had been given soap, towels, toothpaste and toothbrush, and an electric razor. The bed was comfortable if a little too firm for my taste. And it was clean and dry and it eased some of the burden I had been feeling.

Breakfast was short and light, consisting of cereal and eggs. There was milk or juice and I drank juice. There was no coffee. I became an instant curiosity to the others in my unit. People looked at me over one another's shoulders and I heard some whispering, but it didn't faze me. After breakfast we were loaded onto a bus similar to the one that had taken Jennie away. I sat alone, looking out at the dark city streets.

I had never done any sort of manual labor in my life. I was a white collar kid with a white collar future that turned into a white collar present. Just so we're clear, putting on a suit and tie every day and going to an office doesn't mean you don't have a menial job. Putting on a denim shirt and ratty blue jeans and sticking your hands in the mud every day doesn't mean you do. I learned the first shortly after college. I learned the second when I became a laborer for the United Arab Nation.

Most of the laborers working on the reconstruction of New York were United States civilians waiting for extradition, though there were a few Arab men. The foremen and administrators were all Arabs and they

mostly talked down to us and insulted us, but there wasn't any of what you might expect to go on in a prisoner work force. Even the insults were meaningless since I couldn't understand the Arabic and their English was atrocious.

Since it didn't seem worthwhile to put me through any extensive training, I was given simple tasks such as digging and clearing debris by hand. We were excavating what had once been the Wall Street financial district. Here, the buildings had been severely damaged and reconstruction had only barely begun. Most of my companions seemed to resent the hard work, but I found it to be therapeutic. It required little concentration, though safety demanded alertness. I was able to focus my thoughts on other things, largely daydreams in which I would be reunited with my family or what I might wish to say to Jennie if I had the opportunity to contact her.

At the end of that first day, I was exhausted, but impressed with the organization and treatment of refugees. Our work day had begun at 6:30 am and ended at 5:00 pm. This may seem like a long day, but we were given breaks sporadically throughout the course of the day to eat and use the toilet. Lunch was at eleven and lasted an hour and fifteen minutes. We ate sandwiches in a cafeteria and were able to select from a large array of books and magazines that had survived the invasion. There was also television, but, again, everyone spoke Arabic so I couldn't understand it. Instead, I turned my attentions to six year old periodicals that helped catch me up on what had happened leading up the war.

We were given dinner back at the apartment complex and then allowed ninety minutes of socializing before being dismissed to our rooms. I had no interest in socializing. Even if I had, I wasn't given the opportunity. I was escorted back to my apartment immediately after dinner where I found Samud waiting for me.

"Unfortunately," he explained. "We won't be able to get you out of work for our research. I understand that you are tired, but now is the only time we have. I expect Dr. Miktoffin will not keep you for more than an hour."

I looked down at myself. Though given the opportunity to wash our hands and faces, none of us had showered. I was sweaty and filthy and tired and in no mood to participate in any research. Besides which, I was not interested in cooperating just yet.

"Did you get information on any of the people on my list yet?" I asked.

He looked sheepishly away. "I did not have the opportunity to look into it today."

I took a deep breath. "We'll begin the research when you have."

When he turned back, his expression betrayed anger at this manipulation. I wondered in fear for a moment what he would do, but he did nothing. "Dr. Miktoffin will be disappointed."

When it was clear that I wouldn't respond, he stood and left without saying good night. I noticed absently that my heart was beating a regular rate despite my momentary fear. Perhaps I was just too tired for the adrenaline rush. Stripping off my clothing, I showered and was in bed before the rest of my peers had finished their socialization.

Samud came to see me again the next evening, but this time he did not come empty handed. This time I could not help but notice the reactions of the other prisoners as I was once again escorted from the dining hall before socialization. I wondered how often this would happen and how it would affect my life. Once again, I had no interest in forming ties with anyone. Emotional bonds made skipping through time very difficult. I didn't want to add any more names to the list I gave the next "Samud" after the next leap.

He did not offer his hand to me. Apparently he was still sore about my refusal to go with him the night before. Instead, he handed me a folder of papers. I took them out eagerly, looking through the documents of information on each of the members of my family.

Wyatt and Jeremy had relocated to the Midwest, Wisconsin to be more precise. Using government relief offered to displaced citizens, they were able to buy a modest house and move the two families in together. It was a surprise to me that they would do so because, though Attenda had always been extremely cordial and patient with Martie, Martie's jealousy had not allowed her to offer the same courtesy to her sister in law. Devin, now thirteen years old, lived with them and went to school in town. Livvie, at twenty one, had finished college early and moved to California. She was in the process of launching a journalistic career. Jack had enlisted and been killed in action during the Battle of 95 (95 referring to the stretch of highway over which the Americans and the Arabs were fighting as opposed to the year which had been 2011). I felt a pang of grief as I read of Jack's death, but I doubt that it was for Jack himself. As I mentioned, I rarely saw the boy and always envisioned him as a slacker. Of course, he had proven me wrong, showing up to fight for his country in its time of need. Still, there had been no connection between us. For Jeremy, though, I could not imagine what the loss of a son must

have done to him. And Martie... The sheet of paper in my hands could not tell me the emotional damage Martie had endured. As a woman whose life had amounted to her children and nothing else, having half of her reason for existing stripped away must have been a devastating blow. I felt for her as I had never felt for her before.

The last sheet was Jennie's. She was listed as Jennie Campbell, born March 26th, 1994. That made her twenty years old. The picture was from her internment, which had occurred on July 4th, 2009, just a few days after I had disappeared.

"I noticed that the location of her arrest is the same as the location of yours," Samud said after giving me several minutes to stare at the sheet. "I have also brought you this." Reaching into his suit pocket, he pulled out the small and battered notebook I had been using for my journal.

I took it, not saying anything right away. Finally, I put the sheets back into the folder and placed it onto the bookshelf. The journal I kept with me. "I'd like to take a fast shower before we go and visit your friend."

Dr. Miktoffin was a squirrely little man with large round glasses and graying hair. He reminded me of Albert Einstein. I'm also not sure that he was Arabic. His accent sounded faintly Indian and I'm not sure of the origins of his name. I suppose it was my own American ignorance that prevented me from singling out his origin in the Middle East. Every time we met he would greet me both politely and excitedly. He took numerous blood tests and various types of scans. To me it didn't seem as if his equipment was top of the line, but I wasn't concerned as long as the needles were clean. He explained that he believed whole heartedly in what I said of my experiences. He was certain that mine was a rare physical condition that had sprung up in the human population. With so few subjects, it was difficult to trace the beginnings of the leaping syndrome, but he was determined to trace the cause. Of course, tests immediately following my last leap would have provided immeasurable information but that opportunity had been wasted in ignorance. Instead, he developed what he called a *base line* and hoped that it would allow him to predict my next jump. That, at least, would be useful information.

On the nights that I did not go to see the doctor, I was allowed to spend the socialization period with my fellow workers. Actually, the term *allowed* is a bit of stretch. *Required* is closer to the truth. All of the units in the building were brought to a series of large ball rooms, called common rooms, for snacks and socializing. It was like an informal affair

every night. There were folding tables and folding chairs. The floor was made of wood and could have been an adequate dance floor if there had been music. But there was none. No one was allowed to go off on his or her own and without Samud coming to rescue me, I was forced into the common rooms to sit and read or watch incomprehensible television or brood. I spent long hours looking at the picture of Jennie, easily seeing the fifteen year old girl in the picture that had been taken when her manifest had cleared. Of course, I asked Samud if I could contact her in some way, but the answer was no. Apparently, the United States was against communication with people still inside UAN occupied territory. Since Jennie had already been extradited, there was no way for us to get in contact.

Though I did not make friends or have ready conversation with my coworkers, it is unfair to say that I did not get to know them. Conversations were loud and rumors spread through the crowd. There were a handful of outcasts among us that sought even my company once in a while. I didn't have anything really to say to them, but they needed to talk to someone so I did the polite thing and listened.

Jonah Jones was the worst of the lot. He was this six foot six inch black man who weighed in at well over three hundred pounds, with none of it suffering for the very square meals we ate day in and day out. I don't want to say that Jonah was a bad guy or that he wasn't nice in his own way, but he was desperate for human companionship and would latch on to whomever could not find a socialization partner. I never found a partner and was thankful that I was not Jonah's first choice. Unfortunately, I was not his last choice either. When most of the others paired off or better, if it was just me and maybe a couple of others going it alone, there was Jonah, looking for an ear to bend. He had this unnaturally high voice that completely contradicted his appearance. Over the past several months before we had met, hauling bricks and girders had turned Jonah into a physically imposing individual. He was also the most gentle person that I had ever met. One day, he found a flower at the work site. It was just a dandelion and it had been uprooted by someone, but it shone a bright yellow. Jonah brought the flower to me and laid it on the table that evening. He spoke about that flower and how it reminded him of the fields where he grew up. Though it smelled only of dirt and some worker's shoes, he *imagined* a smell that brought him back to his mother and father. It was a touching story, truly, but it ran a little long (forty minutes) and I was at the edge of my tolerance when it concluded. The next day, the flower had turned black and Jonah

had sought me out to orchestrate part two of the story. Mercifully, I was called away by Samud on that day.

Jonah waited for me.

I heard the story the following night.

Another of Jonah's favorite talking partners was Jesse Cataldo. I would put Jesse at about forty or forty five years old. Her face and her hair were a contradiction on that score. There were no wrinkles and when I looked past the dirt and fatigue, I saw a stunning woman. Her hair, however, seemed always tousled and it was white from root to stem. She often tied it back just to keep it out of her face. To be honest, I don't know what Jonah saw in her. She was rude to him constantly, but I got the impression that it had nothing to do with her demeanor. There was a disconnect inside of her that forced outbursts. They were never vulgar or even hurtful, but they were usually abrupt. She would say to him, "No! I can't talk today." And that would be that. Then she would go off to a chair by herself and mutter.

Abraham Ventana was the group's veteran. He was senior in both age and time served. Whenever Abraham sat down to talk to a group, I tried to find a seat close so that I could hear what he was saying. His stories were both informative and entertaining. It was 2009 when he had been captured, which meant he had been in the control of the UAN for five years. The early time he spent as a prisoner was time he described as comfortable if not pleasant. The United Arab soldiers had never treated refugees as military prisoners. There had been no questions or torture. The accommodations, of course, were nothing like we had in the work unit, but the days passed and passed and passed. When the work units were formed, Abraham, at fifty eight years old, was assigned quickly. It was a wonder he had never found himself on a cleared manifest.

Before the invasion, Abraham had been a jack of all trades. Some of his life's work included painting (portraits early on and then houses), repair and installation of air conditioning units, cab driver, nurse, veterinarian's assistant, computer network technician, and a host of others that I simply don't remember. He was good at almost everything and there wasn't a member of the group who didn't like him or envy him. On my fifth night, the first night I had the option to sit and socialize, he came over and introduced himself to me. I shook his hand and gave him my name, but I was still brooding over the picture of Jennie so he didn't stay.

Though the rules were clearly posted, they were not strictly enforced. As I mentioned, fraternization outside the socialization period was considered against the rules, but there were nights when some of the

workers would go to the rooms of some of the other workers. The only secrets between the members of the unit, myself included, were those that were tangled in contradicting stories. One such story surrounded Doreen Lander and Carlos Castillo. They were together almost every socialization period. Sometimes they would be joined by others, frequently by Jesse Cataldo. At night, they would find each other as well, but the reasons were not clear. Some people speculated that there was a romantic relationship between the two that was sometimes enhanced by Jesse. Others thought they were just “working” together. One thing that was not a secret was that Carlos was planning an escape. He was young, nineteen or twenty years old. In contrast to Abraham, Carlos was one of the very last refugees to be captured. The work units were already in full force at the time and the excavations and renovations were ferreting out all of the stragglers. Carlos’ story is one of hardship and heroism. Much like Jennie, he had lost family and friends and survived as a child against the soldiers and the gangs that had formed in the streets of New York. Unlike Jennie, however, he had a careless streak in him. Instead of seeking the safety of high floors and shadowy alcoves, he had slept on the street, almost challenging anyone to oppose him. He’d even spent time in the subways. Jennie had told me about the subways once. She’d gone down there expecting to find shelter and had found only death and lunacy. With her foot on the last stair, she had changed her mind and gone back up into the air.

Carlos and Doreen’s escape plans were mucked up in the telling, but the knowledge of the plan had made it through the entire crowd. To hear Jonah tell it, most of the unit had wanted in at first. They had approached Carlos in small groups, professing their expertise at one vital thing or another. He fervently denied that he was even contemplating escape but no one believed him. It got to the point, and again this was all before I even arrived, where he was picking fights with anyone who would even mention it to him. The truth, by my way of thinking, was that Carlos, for all of his bravado, was truly planning an escape that would never happen. I didn’t know why he chose to spend so much time planning something that he would never execute. Certainly he was no coward, but there was never any action taken and no one seemed to bother about it much anymore.

Finally there was Lydia Tiri. I didn’t recognize her right away. The hour I had spent with Warren Li’s group had passed in the company of the Tiris, but the bulk of that time had been passed listening to Daniel Tiri’s stories. I didn’t see Daniel in the unit and Lydia looked very sad so

I could only assume the worst. She didn't recognize me or at least gave no indication that she did so I left it alone. I had enough depression of my own without having to share with others.

Certainly there were more people in the unit and even more housed in the building. Rod and Davis were a homosexual couple that were constant targets of Carlos' anger. Miriam was a previous business analyst whose hobby was to collect pieces of information on the others and work out the best ways for them to market themselves within the unit. She tried it with me once, but I rebuffed her, probably less politely than I would have liked. Anderson ate a lot. Amber ate very little. The collection of personalities was almost endless among the units. I couldn't possibly have gotten to know them all and had little ambition to get to know any of them.

Throughout October, Samud and I became friendly. Most of the time, when he rescued me from socialization, he took me to see Dr. Miktoffin. Once in a while, though, we sat and played chess. It had come out during one of our conversations that I could play the game. As an avid player himself, he was delighted to find an opponent. Apparently, his social life was extremely lacking. Living in North America was difficult for the Arab citizens, as it must be for any "colonists". Work was demanding, almost overwhelming, so any excuse to escape for a short while was something to which even Samud would cling. He won regularly. Of course, he was student of the game. I was a poor player, having been taught by Wyatt when I was six years old. He'd shown me the game as a prank, hoping I would be able to play Jeremy to a standstill and embarrass him. Of course Jeremy had made me look foolish and I wondered whether the joke had been intended to be on Jeremy or me.

During the first week in November, Samud had to travel to what had once been Saudi Arabia and was now the capitol of the United Arab Nation. He would be gone almost two weeks during which I would not be pulled for any sessions with Dr. Miktoffin. Missing the research was no great loss. Though the doctor was always excited to see me, he was able to provide little in the way of results. While he maintained that my condition was a physical manifestation of some innate abnormality, he could neither identify the abnormality nor even discover a roundabout explanation for its existence. I had begun to doubt the doctor's ability and began to feel much like a maltreated lab rat.

The absence of Samud meant that I would have to spend twelve straight days in socialization. It was a gloomy prospect, but there was

nothing for it. I had already begun to grow impatient with my situation, wondering desperately about my family and, moreso, about Jennie.

It was during this period that I met Igor Grundel. Never in my life have I met a person whose name is more fitting to his personality. Igor was a mean potato of a man with scrunched features and a gravelly whisper for a voice. He always smelled like my grandmother's kitchen even though we all used the same soap and ate the same food. I had noticed him during the previous weeks, but never thought to make note of anything but the man's odd appearance. For all of his oddities, he seemed popular among the group. But his secrets seemed well hidden. When he approached me, it was with a miserly smile and wringing hands.

"May I call you Mathew?" he asked by way of introduction.

Looking up from the photo of Jennie, I willed him to go away. When the hint did not take root, I folded the paper carefully on the creases and put it back into my pocket.

"I am Igor," he said as he pulled out the chair next to me and sat his strange body down. "I was noticing that you often spend all of your time here looking at that piece of paper. I would bet that you spend much of your other time staring at it also."

I did not like him and I did not want to talk to him, but I did not dismiss him nor did I answer him. Perhaps my treatment of Miriam had softened me a bit, returned just a bit of who I'd been before all of this time jumping nonsense.

"If you were to write her a letter, I could have it delivered for you."

At this I must have had some visible reaction because his entire face lit up with glee. Even his squinty eyes opened wide with the smile. But I had learned to be cautious. I was not blind to the fact that several of the others had broken off their conversations to observe mine.

"How?" I asked. "She's been cleared back into the States."

He nodded. "Of course she has. But you certainly don't believe that our government is the one blocking all of the communication and holding up the clearing of manifests, do you? Has your friend Samud convinced you that the benevolent United Arab Nation is working their hardest to see us home to our loved ones while the United States prevents it?"

Mentioning Samud was a ploy and I knew it, but its effect was no less severe. I suddenly saw myself in the eyes of my peers. I was the teacher's pet, the lackey to the administration. This impression of myself, no matter how distasteful, made me even more suspicious.

"You still haven't told me how you deliver the letters."

He shrugged. "Channels."

"No thank you," I said.

He seemed taken aback, so sure was he that I would do anything to contact Jennie. "You don't think I can do it?"

"How would I know that the letter had arrived?"

"I have sent many letters on their way and given many people hope. It lifts a large burden when one knows that his family and friends know that he is alive and safe."

I peered around the room and looked at the people looking at me. Their expressions betrayed none of their feelings.

Again, he had not answered my question. Nor would he.

It occurred to me that I had nothing to lose. My fears were grounded in bad memories of high school mischief. Pass a private letter to one student so that she can pass it to another and another and the letter is read over and over until your most private feelings are public knowledge. Maximum humiliation for minimum effort. I would keep the letter simple.

"I just give you a letter?" I asked.

He brightened, feeling that he had closed the deal, but wagged a finger at me just the same. "You will do something for me first."

My suspicions arose once again, but I listened.

"There is a manifest that will clear in six days. It will thin out a work unit in the Bronx. Transfers usually come from other thinned units, so ours is not a candidate. You will see that I am transferred to the Bronx."

"What?" I was appalled. "How am I supposed to do that?"

He smiled knowingly. "You will ask your friend."

"He won't be back for another week."

He nodded in response. "I am aware. There will be enough time."

"I'll think about it."

But there was nothing to think about, really. Even the smallest hope of getting word to Jennie lifted my spirits. I couldn't *not* try. And, from what I could understand, several people had already *paid* Igor to send out letters to loved ones. He had been providing that service for the better part of eleven months. No one questioned his methods or doubted his effectiveness. All were certain their letters reached their intended recipients. The recommendation was unanimous.

Of course, no one had had to arrange a transfer for him and, as word got out that it was I who was to guarantee that the *mailman* would be on his way to a different unit, some bad blood began to stir up throughout

the group. Before, most people had thought of me very little, if at all. Now they just thought very little of me.

Samud came to see me on his first night back. He had not even been to his home yet. Instead of going to Dr. Miktoffin's laboratory or staying in my apartment, we went to his office where I had first met him. He was very excited about something, but refused to tell me what it was until we got there.

"Sit down," he said, pulling a bottle and two plastic cups from the bottom drawer of his desk. "It's not champagne, but it will do for our celebration."

"What are we celebrating?" I asked.

"My promotion. And the fact that I am going to be moving back home."

"Oh," I said, feeling a strange sense of disappointment. "When?"

He must have sensed my feelings because his mood lessened. "Two months," he said. "The first of the year."

"Will that mean an end to Dr. Miktoffin's research?"

He smiled again. "I'm afraid so."

This did not disappoint me. In the time that Samud was away I had begun to realize just how much I disliked and didn't respect the doctor. In spite of things, however, I had genuinely come to like Samud. He had proven a good companion.

Pushing my untouched drink forward, he continued, "I have been given a large amount of responsibility and with it, a large amount of power. I would like it very much if you would accompany back to my country."

To this I had no response. All the time that we had been together, it had been in the back of mind to ask about Igor's request. During the previous week, all of my thoughts had been focused on two things. The first was the letter to Jennie, which was composed, penned, and sitting between my mattress and my box spring. The second was the way I would approach Samud about getting Igor transferred to the Bronx. Never had I expected him to throw his own promotion at me, let alone the offer of citizenship within the United Arab Nation. Of course, there was no way I could even consider accepting his offer. For the first time in weeks, I thought seriously about my next leap. It had been a long time since my arrival and I had no way of knowing when I would depart. What would it be like if it were to happen to me in a foreign country, surrounded by people who did not speak English and who would not regard me as anything but an alien enemy? The notion was foolhardy and I think he knew it.

"I have to..." I began.

"Forget it." He waved a dismissive hand at me. "It could never work."

"I have to ask a favor," I said.

Sitting down, his elation deflated, he looked at me, waiting.

"There was a manifest that cleared yesterday...a few people from the Bronx were on it, is that right?"

Taken aback, he asked, "How did you know about it?"

1. If Igor could know about a manifest and from where its members came, he might just be able to get a letter delivered to Jennie in the United States proper.

"I was wondering if it were possible to get someone transferred to the Bronx since they'll be shorthanded."

Now his mood was completely gone. I had turned his celebration into mourning. "You wish to leave? How long have you been thinking about this?"

"Not me," I said. "Someone else."

For the first time since I had presented my list of people for him to look up, Samud stared at me with an appraising glare. Unlike myself, he was aware of the goings on of people in a captive situation. There were always favors exchanged for favors.

"Who is this friend?" he asked. "What is he giving to you?"

"Is that important?"

"It is. This is no small favor. For him to ask it and you to bring it forward, the return must be great."

I said nothing for a moment, gauging how best to answer his suspicions. I would have to tell him something and there were no lies at my disposal. But I was spared having to tell one because the truth came to him before I could speak.

"It is your friend Jennie, yes?"

I nodded dumbly.

He nodded back. "Then Igor Grundel has taken advantage of my absence to rope you into one of his schemes."

I cannot describe the terrible feeling that overcame me at that moment. Without any explanation from me, Samud had been able to figure out exactly what was going on.

"His price is usually not so high," Samud continued, drumming his fingers on the desk. "I suppose he saw an opportunity in our friendship."

"I didn't know," I stammered. "The others..."

"They don't know either. Come with me."

He stood from his desk and waited for me to follow suit. We left the office and took the stairs down one floor. There was a ten foot by ten foot storage closet here, with shelves lining the walls and boxes filling the shelves. Samud opened the door with a key and, after a moment's looking, pulled down a medium sized brown box with a lid. The box was light when he handed it to me and I set it down on the floor to inspect its contents. I was unsurprised but no less devastated to discover it was filled with the letters of my peers. They had been turning their letters in to Igor for months and paying him whatever he asked for that false hope. In turn, he had been turning the letters over to Samud, who had stored them in a box.

"Did you read these?" Every single envelope had been carefully opened with a letter opener.

He nodded.

I think there may have been tears in my eyes. There were too many rusted sides to this coin. There was the lie and the treachery from Igor and the invasion of privacy by Samud.

"Whatever you think this is, Mathew," Samud told me. "It is still a place where the prisoners are the prisoners and the guards are the guards. Igor Grundel is nothing more than a profiteering mole."

"Is he even a prisoner?" I asked.

Samud nodded. "He came to me within his first few days and offered his services. I am curious now as to why he seeks transfer and why he would need to get it through you when he and I have regular contact."

I shook my head. I had none of that information. Samud put the lid back on the box and tried to lift it, but I held it down.

"I'd like to return these letters to the people who wrote them," I said.

He smiled. "I'm sure that you would, but I can't allow it."

"Why? Igor's done working for you. He wants out so you can't trust him and, even if you did trust him, I'm not going to keep this secret for you." I paused, waiting for a response, but he gave me none. His expression remained the same. "You must have known that when you showed this to me."

"I was hoping that our friendship..."

"*Friendship?* What kind of friendship do we have? Remember, Samud, that this is still a place where the prisoners are the prisoners and the guards are the guards."

His posture became sad and he released the box. "So it is."

When I was back in my room, I was sorry that I had ruined his day. Perhaps I had done him a favor by removing the conflict. Now he could be completely overjoyed about his promotion and his impending return to his homeland. I placed the box of letters on my empty bookshelf and then took out the letter I had written to Jennie. My rage and despair were so great that I couldn't do anything but stare blankly at the words for hours to come. In the morning, I went to work without having slept.

The next work day seemed very long. When it finally ended and we were bussed back to the apartment building, I was exhausted. My anger had dissipated, replaced only by utter despondency. I had no energy, no rush as I planned to reveal Igor's treachery to the group.

As the dinner plates were emptied and the tables cleared, he came to see me. Obviously, he knew that Samud had returned and he also knew that I had been to see him. The miserly grin was back on his face so he clearly didn't know what I had in store for him.

"Did you speak with your friend?" he asked me.

I nodded back at him, unable to look him in the eye. We were standing up now, moving into the common rooms.

"And?"

"I'll get you my letter," I said and detached myself from him.

We were allowed, before socialization, to go to our rooms briefly in case there was something we wanted to get, such as a book or a deck of cards. We were carefully monitored as we went upstairs and carefully monitored as we came back down. When I emerged from my room with the box of letters, the guard on duty looked at me queerly. Because he did not speak English, he did not give me any instructions before taking it from me and inspecting its contents. Though he looked confused by what he found, he could see no reason to deny it to me and so handed it back.

I returned to the common room straight faced and without emotion. Some people noticed the oddity of me entering with a box in my hands, but it was not until I stood up on one of the tables that the room began to go quiet. I waited, saying nothing, until everyone in the room had ceased his or her conversation and focused his or her attention on me. Sparing one glance at the stricken Igor, who seemed to know what I held in my hands, I put the box on the table at my feet and took off the lid. Reaching inside, I pulled out the first letter.

"Does anyone here know a Susan Wu?" I kept my voice low, but it carried through the silence. People from other rooms had moved into this one and I had the attention of all of the workers in the building.

Tentatively, a hand went up.

"This is yours," I said, holding it out to the lady. She came forward and took it slowly from my hand. She must have recognized her own handwriting on the letter immediately because all sense of hesitation left her and she tore it out of the envelope to scan its contents. In a moment, she had turned viciously on Igor.

"This is the letter I gave you," she screamed at him. "I *paid* you to send this!"

He shrank away from her, no lie coming to his defense. Before the scene could get any uglier, I reached into the box and pulled out another letter.

"Barney Jefferson. Who wrote a letter to Barney Jefferson?"

Jonah Jones came forward, his large face looking much like a saddened child's. But before he could send an accusation Igor's way, I pulled out the next letter.

"Martin Jones."

"Paula Glock."

"Shlomo Uris."

"Daniel Tiri."

Lydia came and took the letter without looking at me. She then melted back into the crowd.

As I read more names and returned more of the lies, the noise in the room grew. I had to shout to be heard. Eventually, though, handing them out became easier because those that had given letters to Igor found their way forward while those that hadn't left the room. Igor himself moved close to the guards for protection. When the box was empty, I got down off of the table and went to him.

"This is yours," I said, handing him the box. "Now it's full of your promises."

The next several days were not good for Igor Grundel. His usual campaign through the common rooms had come to a halt. No one would speak to him but everyone, even those who had not had dealings with him, had terrible glares for him. There was no free moment when there were not ten pairs of eyes on him. Because he could not go to his room during socialization, he sat by himself in a corner, close to one or more guards. He sat with his eyes closed so that he did not have to face accusing eyes. Two days after I had outed him, there was an accident at the work site in which he was almost killed. The word *accident* may be improperly used. After that Samud came to the site to investigate. I saw him talking to Igor, the little man throwing words furiously around and

waving his arms in the air. In the end, though, Igor did not get his transfer. His betrayal had ended in his being betrayed.

For myself, the situation was largely unchanged. My meetings with Dr. Miktoffin had stopped on a dime as did my meetings with Samud. No one offered me gratitude or friendship for what I had done. Though Igor was hated now and could do no more harm, I had not elevated my status any by uncovering the scandal. Everyone hates the messenger. But no one tried to kill me and no one glared at me angrily. Somehow, I had dropped down on the list of people Jonah liked to speak with, which wasn't a bad thing. So I went back to sitting alone and brooding over the picture of Jennie and the letter I had written her.

As November wore on and the cold became colder, work became harder and my misery burrowed deeper. The dynamic in the common rooms returned to normal, less the inclusion of Igor, who still kept to himself for safety. My mood had become a consistent gloom. I awoke depressed, worked depressed, ate depressed, and slept depressed. I began to dream of Jennie getting onto that bus, her ghostly visage through the dirty window ripped away from me. In almost every dream she was killed and I awoke with a heart wrenching fear that would not dissolve. My hours of sleep shrank until my eyes were sunken into my head. I did not eat well.

I prayed for a long leap through time.

Then, on Thanksgiving, a day we were given off out of respect for the country to which we had once belonged, I had an epiphany.

The holiday was nothing but a normal day off, something we had every Sunday anyway. We were kept in our rooms except for mealtimes and socialization, which was the ninety minutes following each mealtime. Throughout breakfast and breakfast socialization I brooded. Throughout lunch and lunch socialization I brooded. Between lunch socialization and dinner, however, I came to a conclusion. I could no longer rely upon my ersatz power to save me from myself. A long leap, I realized, would not take me any closer to Jennie or to my family. In fact, it would take me further away. It had been so long that I was suddenly sure that my days of time tripping were over. If I wanted to get out of the United Arab Nation occupied territory of the United States, I would need to do it myself.

During dinner socialization, I stood in the center of the room and looked around at all of the faces. They were all the same. Everyone had conceded to the life given him or her by the UAN. Though they considered this portion of their lives a bit of purgatory, they had accepted it.

We could hardly think of ourselves as prisoners when we were well fed and well housed. The cage was gilded well. There was no burning desire for the captivity to end. These people had been completely beaten down by the lack of hardship. No one absolutely hated being there enough to want to get out. No one, that is, except me.

I found Carlos Castillo sitting at a table with Doreen Lander and Jesse Cataldo. The conversation came to an abrupt end when I appeared between them and all eyes fell upon me.

"What do you want?" Carlos asked.

"Are you ever going to do it?" I asked.

"Do what?"

"Escape."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm going to do it," I said to him. "With or without you."

His jaw was clenched as he struggled to find a response.

"Stuff it!" Jesse yelled at me, but I ignored her.

The thing of it was that I really had no idea how to perform an escape. I wasn't even sure how people managed to move from room to room at night. When I told Carlos that I intended to go with or without him, I was bluffing, hoping to draw him. By all accounts, cracking into his select clique was near impossible. In the weeks I'd spent as part of the work unit, I'd seen a handful of people sit with him and Doreen, but I couldn't be sure that all of them, or any of them, were in on the escape.

Then Carlos laughed. I couldn't tell whether he was laughing at me or at Jesse's juvenile outburst. Doreen just stared. I could see that I wasn't getting anywhere so I walked away. The trouble was that I didn't know how to press. I didn't have the skill to make Carlos think he needed me despite the fact that I would probably be nothing more than a liability. All I knew how to do was pretend that I was serious and hope that something would come of it.

Something came of it.

But not the something I expected.

For the rest of that night, I drew stares from some of the other people. It was the first time since I had virtually destroyed Igor Grundel that anyone had paid me any attention. I didn't like it. Carlos ignored me and I sat looking at the picture of Jennie, becoming worn out with each new fold, and trying to will the others away.

The next day we were back to work. The weather had turned foul and there were flurries about. It was early for heavy snow, but not out of the realm of possibility. If it snowed, I doubted that we would be given time

off. We arrived back at the apartment wet and dirty and exhausted, knowing that the Thanksgiving holiday (which had consisted of no thanks and no giving) had probably left us worse off for having had the rest.

After dinner, I was sitting by myself, glaring at Carlos and Doreen, who were, in turn, completely unconcerned with my existence. Sensing a presence at the table, I shifted my attention in preparation for a Jonah Jones lecture. But it wasn't Jonah Jones who sat across from me. It was Lydia Tiri. She looked very old. When I had met her all those years (weeks for me) ago, she had been a lower middle aged woman with some life to her. The work she had done for Warren Li, carting around supplies with her husband, had seemed to give her life a purpose. Now she was withdrawn, her face lined, shoots of grey showing in her hair. With long bony fingers, she held out the letter I had returned to her.

"Why did you do this?" she asked. It was not an accusation. She wasn't telling me that I had done something I shouldn't have done. She simply wanted to understand my motivation.

Unfortunately, I didn't have an answer for her. As I thought about it, I couldn't really put my motivation into words. I had just felt it needed to be done. That's what I told her.

"When I gave this letter to Igor," she said. "And he told me he had delivered it, I felt strong again. I was sure that Daniel had survived and made it out of this city. When you handed me back the letter, all of that confidence just...left."

Again, I don't feel as if she was accusing me, but I felt guilty anyway. Igor had been right about what these letters had meant to the people who sent them. But when I had seen that box and known it was all a fraud, I just felt that I couldn't let it go on. I was sorry for having taken so much away from all of those people, but not sorry for what I had done to Igor.

"Did you write to that girl?" she asked.

I nodded.

"I saw you calling to her when you arrived. You made a lot of noise and my window looks out onto the street."

I felt my eyes water up.

"I couldn't see her very well," Lydia continued. "Is she the same girl you were with five years ago?"

I nodded again. "Jennie."

"Jennie," she repeated. "With an *ie*."

I looked her in the eye and smiled. "You have a good memory."

She changed the subject. "You went to see Carlos."

"I want to escape."

"That's what I figured. That's what everyone figures. Only someone who hasn't been here that long would try and see Carlos about an escape."

I shrugged. "I've been here long enough to know it would do no good. I'm desperate."

"Me, too."

We sat alone for awhile, saying nothing. Surprisingly, I found some comfort in her presence, as if all I had been missing these past weeks was a companion. Any companion.

As the socialization began to break up with people yawning and stretching and the guards getting ready to escort their groups back to their rooms, Lydia said to me, "Carlos is never going to do it."

"I know," I replied.

For the next week, Lydia came to sit with me during socialization. She kept me company every night and I was glad of it. The loss of someone special was something we shared and that brought us together. Sometimes we talked about Daniel and sometimes we talked about Jennie. Sometimes we talked about escaping.

December 6th was a Saturday. Though we weren't given any extra time on Saturday nights, it was still Saturday night. The common rooms were more upbeat because everyone had the next day off. People shed their expressions of defeat for a little while and became the people they had been once upon a time. Lydia and I did not. Even if I was a social person by nature, I don't think I could have risen above the emptiness inside of me. Though I showed very little of it to Lydia, I was finding my imprisonment to be more and more intolerable day by day. I had not seen Samud in some time and the regular schedule was beginning to gnaw at my psyche. It was ironic, really, that the very stability I had sought out when I had first starting leaping through time had now become my enemy. I wanted desperately to get out.

On this particular Saturday evening, we were joined by a third person. He came to the table, going unnoticed until he sat right across from us and looked at us both with his squinty eyes.

"Are you going to do it?" he asked.

"Do what?" I replied, the irony of it all unhidden.

"Escape," he whispered, his eyes shifting in all directions to take note of any who might be watching us.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Lydia just stared at him with cold eyes as what had become a perpetual frown on his face spread into that old familiar miserly grin. "You're a bad liar, Cristian. Don't worry. No one else knows. I just figured it out."

I was about to rebuff him and a quick look at Lydia showed me all I needed to know about her feelings. Igor had taken something from her without ever having really given it. He had done that to us all. But I remembered something about what I had felt before I knew this. I remembered sitting with Samud and noting his surprise at my knowledge of the cleared manifest and where its people came from. That information had come from Igor and that information had been sound. To me that meant that there was some legitimacy to him no matter what he had done.

"Could you have gotten those letters delivered?" I asked him.

"No," he admitted. "Nothing goes over the border, but it's not just the U.S. that wants it that way."

Lydia held up the letter to Daniel. It was always with her, only pocketed away when she was either working or eating. "Did you have a good laugh over it? Over all of them?"

"Mrs. Tiri, I didn't do it for laughs."

"Then why did you do it?"

To him, this was a ridiculous question and he made no attempt to hide that belief as he gave what he felt was the obvious answer. "For profit."

She would not be put off. "And where's the profit in coming to us now?"

He smiled. "The profit in leaving is in escaping the fact that there's no more profit to be had here." He explained it as if she were less than a child and it irritated me, though I said nothing. Lydia said nothing also.

Igor breathed. "I was already beginning to lose credibility here. There's only so much you can draw out of a crowd with nothing but a promise for a return. Trying to get that transfer was a last ditch effort."

"Why didn't you try and get it yourself?" I asked.

He made a raspberry sound with his lips. "Samud detests me. He did business with me because it suited him. Just like you."

"And you thought he would do it for me?"

"Mr. Cristian, you are transparent. Your relationship with Samud was easy to identify. I knew that he liked you and you liked him. When he went away and you had to sit in socialization every day, your mood became worse and worse. You missed him."

I think I may have blushed.

Igor pretended not to notice. "The timing was right. Or it was the best I was going to get. It was always a longshot because he would know what I was up to. I never expected him to show you those letters, though."

"Do you have a plan?" I asked, returning to the subject of escape.

But he shook his head. "I don't make plans. I take advantage of circumstances."

Lydia made a noise of disgust.

He looked at her but seemed unoffended. "Mrs. Tiri, I think you'll find that you'll be able to rise above your feelings for me in order to escape."

"If you can't come up with a plan," she said, "then how are you going to help us escape?"

"By taking advantage of a few circumstances so that we can carry out your plan," he answered simply.

Though Igor was not infallible, as I had proven, he never did anything by accident. Every move he made was determined by a series of circumstances and possible outcomes. He looked at situations and broke them down into individual pieces, fitting them together different ways in order to determine what actions he might take in order to generate positive responses. And he did it all on the fly. When he had approached Lydia and me about the escape, he had done it after a week's observation but with no contemplation. He had never sat down and considered what might be the best day. In fact, he was never sure he was going to come to us until he had actually decided to do it. He was a watcher of people and when I had chosen company after so many weeks in the unit, it was an event he had deemed interesting.

Of course, I don't think he realized that we didn't have a plan of escape. He knew we hadn't had anything solidified, but I'm reasonably sure he wasn't expecting that we didn't have anything at all. I was loath to confide this in him, but he could see it. He sat with us all throughout the next day, our day off, during three meals and three socialization periods waiting to "take advantage of circumstances" that just never arose. Finally, as the evening turned into night and the time for us to go to our rooms approached, he slammed his hand down onto the table and said, "You can't even get out of your rooms, can you?"

I looked at Lydia and she at me and we both felt like ignorant children, but we did not answer him.

Agitated, he shook his head at us and walked away. I supposed he saw us as another of his mistakes. With me he was oh for two.

The next evening he came to us and asked if we had a plan yet. We just looked at him with glazed eyes. When did he think we'd had the time to devise an escape plan? As he walked away, though, I did notice something. We had drawn the attention of Carlos Castillo.

The next day, when Igor came again, I looked again and saw that, again, Carlos had looked our way.

On Tuesday, when Igor came again to ask us if we had devised a plan, I had an answer for him.

"Look at Carlos."

"What?"

"Carlos is my plan. Look at him."

When Igor turned his head, Carlos averted his gaze. But he wasn't quick enough to escape Igor's notice. The wheels must have started turning because Igor took a seat. "What are you thinking?"

"Carlos has been planning an escape since he got here. He doesn't care who knows it because the only people who even exist to him are the people he talks to."

Now that greedy grin returned to Igor's face. "You want Carlos' plan?"

I shook my head. "I want Carlos *and* his plan."

"Well then," Igor said, standing once again. "I guess I'll just go over and talk to him."

And that's just what he did. He went over and sat down at Carlos Castillo's table without being invited and took full advantage of Carlos' curiosity. Things must have gone well because he didn't return to our table for the rest of the evening.

Between midnight and 12:01 am, I felt myself being shaken out of my sleep. Groggy, I rolled over and looked up at Igor's ugly face. "Shift change. Let's go."

Apparently, at midnight there was a changing of the guard. The guards didn't much care if the prisoners went from room to room because no one ever caused any trouble. If they saw it, however, they would have to do something about it. So it was common knowledge (common to everyone but me) that you could move around for about five minutes during the shift change. There were cameras in the halls, but apparently they were unmonitored during shift changes as well. It was as if we were being given leave to sneak around. Even though I thought it strange at the time, I didn't give it much thought. I had never

spent any time in captivity and the relative comfort and safety of our surroundings lent to a distorted image of what a cage was supposed to be like.

Igor gave me all of fifteen seconds to dress. I had to go to the bathroom, but he said I could do that when we got to Carlos' room. The shift changes were short so we had to move quickly. He didn't even bother to check the halls and steered clear of the elevator. We went quickly to the stairs and climbed two floors to Carlos' room. When we entered, without knocking, Igor closed the door softly behind us. Doreen and Jesse were both there but Lydia was absent. As if reading my mind, Carlos gave me a sour look.

"We didn't have time to get both of you. Next time, maybe you can come on your own."

"Why now?" I asked.

"It's not important," he said. "And keep your voice down."

"It's important to me. If I'm going to trust you..."

"Trust me?" he said. "Without me, you don't go anywhere."

Igor looked away sheepishly.

"That's not the point."

"Igor says you're serious. And I *know* he's serious. The rest of these people are serious up until they have to get their hands dirty. They *like* it here. It's easy work and no responsibility."

I tried to gauge the accuracy of what he was saying. There were too many people involved for his beliefs to be true across the spectrum. But he believed it. That was clear at least. I also guessed that he'd chosen me because of Igor. If anyone was serious about getting out, it would be Igor. His reputation was shot. He was universally despised. Someone had tried to kill him.

For the next four hours, leading up to the last shift change for the night, we discussed the escape plan. You would think that such a thing would have had to be wildly complicated. You would think that every person involved would have a vital part of the plan. But it wasn't the case. All a really good escape plan needed was information and a route. At least, that's all this one needed. Carlos had not spent years working out the details. Despite the constant murmurs of the development of the plan and their huddled meetings during the socialization periods, the plan had been developed in its entirety early on.

In sealing off the city, the United Arab Nation had done a poor job of it. While the bridges were guarded, the tunnels were sealed off. Here, Doreen was the key. During the early days of the reconstruction, she

had been assigned to fortify the barriers on the tunnels. Since these operations had been performed mostly by American citizens, each of the barriers had been sabotaged. Though she had not been as skilled as some of the others, the sabotage had been explained to her and she was fairly certain that she could find the weak spots that would collapse the whole thing. I wasn't very comfortable with the phrase *fairly certain*, but I kept my mouth shut.

The trick to the whole thing was stealing a car. Actually, we really needed a bus because there were seven of us including Lydia and Jonah Jones. Jonah Jones made it onto the roster because of Jesse. There must have been an earlier argument about it because it seemed to be a sore point with Carlos. Jesse was the one pushing to have Jonah included, which was ironic because she was often mean to him. So we needed a bus. While there was a bus that took us to and from the work site, that bus was only available at those times. Carlos explained that they had considered trying to steal the bus just before the work day, but then it would be a high speed chase to the tunnel and we would likely be caught while taking down the barrier. The operation required stealth, which meant getting out during the night and finding a bus.

The buses were kept in depots and the depots were nowhere near our apartment complex. We could have conceivably walked to a depot but it would have taken valuable time. There were also police vans. Sometimes, American prisoners did not cooperate and needed to be formally jailed. There were police vans at the jails. Carlos suggested that one or two of us get ourselves jailed and then steal a police van. I remarked that that was hardly inconspicuous and he gave me a sour look. Carlos was not a man given to subtlety. But subtlety was required here.

"What about an ambulance?" Jesse suggested as the hour and the arguments dragged on close to three o'clock. "Getting out of a hospital has to be a lot easier than getting out of jail." She pointed at me. "Just break his stupid nose and they'll put him right in."

I took two steps back in spite of myself. While the hospital plan had merit, or was at least worth looking into, I wasn't exactly delighted with the part of the plan where my nose was broken.

Igor came to my rescue. "It's not as easy as all that. I've been to the hospital. The security there is tighter than the jail because they've got stuff to protect. You can't just wander the halls and you definitely aren't getting out of there without someone noticing you."

"Which brings us right back to square one," Carlos said through gritted teeth. "There's no way to get a bus."

Doreen made a huffy noise.

"I don't want to hear it, Doreen," Carlos shot at her.

"Hear what?" Igor asked.

"Forget it," Carlos ordered definitively. "It's a dumb idea."

I looked at their faces. Clearly this was something that had come up between them before Igor and I had been invited in. Doreen seemed to be trying to garner support for a plan that had long since been discarded by the others. This political ploy had not escaped Carlos' notice and he certainly did not appreciate the subterfuge. Jesse, on the other hand, just looked put out, as if she were just angry about having to rehash this same subject yet again.

I felt spiteful. "I'd like to hear it."

I had expected a reaction from Carlos, but his reaction was so angry that it still took me by surprise. Instead of wheeling on me, he pounced on Igor, balling his hands into fists and getting right into his face. Another thing that surprised me was that, though there was tremendous emotion in his voice, he did not raise it above a whisper. Apparently, even when Carlos lost his head, he did not lose his head.

"You take responsibility for this son of a bitch. You're here because you can get information we can't and he's here because you want him here so shut him the hell up."

Igor looked positively terrified and I can't say I blame him. But my read on Carlos was that he wouldn't do anything dangerous or violent in that small room for fear of alerting the guards. When four o'clock came we would all have to get back to our rooms in a hurry anyway.

"I'd still like to hear it," I said.

"I think we should just walk," said Doreen before Carlos could interrupt again.

I thought about it a moment. Escape on foot rather than by bus. Admittedly, it didn't seem practical. We had dismissed walking to a depot because of the time issue. There was also the problem of seven people walking down the street in the middle of the night. Not very subtle.

"See?" said Carlos. "Stupid."

She stared daggers at him. "I'm not finished."

"You're finished," he said.

Have you ever been in a situation where you become an unexpected witness to an event that is going to have great impact on the lives people who are not you. It's almost like being a part of the show and a spectator at the same time. It is an awkward and uncomfortable feeling. That was how I felt just then. With the notion of escape becoming a reality in the

eyes of Carlos and Doreen, she was suddenly asserting herself in a way that I presumed she had never done before. The outcome of the argument would change their dynamic. To make matters worse, I had precipitated the argument by expressing my interest in Doreen's idea, a sincere interest to be sure. Carlos glared at me before sitting himself on the bed in sullen silence.

Doreen turned back to Igor and me. "We could use the subway tunnels," she said.

"You can't go down there," Carlos told her. "You don't know what it's like down there."

And that's where I saw it. There was a quaver to his voice and a widening of his pupils. Carlos was, for the first time, showing fear.

"They've cleaned out the subway tunnels," Igor said.

"They did not," Carlos shot back. "They blocked 'em all off and left the people down there to die."

But Igor shook his head. "I spent enough time in Samud's office to get a look at the entire reconstruction plan. You don't just fill in an entire subway system. Especially not one as complex and useful as New York's."

"They didn't do any work down there," Carlos maintained. "There aren't any work crews that go into the subways."

"Not any *American* work crews. It's too hard to keep track of people down there so they only send Arabs."

Jesse made the noise again. "Then we can't go down there anyway."

"We can if we have a map with all of the work areas marked up. If we need to, we can hide out down there for a few days until they stop looking for us."

"And how are we going to get a map?" Carlos asked.

Igor looked at me.

"What am I supposed to do?"

Igor said, "Samud keeps that map in the file cabinet in his office. Go and see him."

"I don't see Samud anymore," I said shortly. "And even if I did, I doubt he'd just give me a map of the subway."

That miserly smile returned to Igor's face and I was sickened. I knew then that he, of course, had information that I did not. Whatever it was, though, I knew it would feel like slime on my hands when I heard it.

"He will see you. And he will give you the map."

"Quit being an asshole and tell him what he needs to do," Jesse complained.

He looked at her sourly, unhappy that she had wrecked his moment. But time was running out and he did as he was told. "Samud will give you the map because you are going to blackmail him. You are going to threaten to expose him as a homosexual if he doesn't."

"What?!" This came from all four of us.

Igor giggled. "Did you think he invited you back to his country just so he would have someone to play chess with?" He looked around the room, pleased by the stunned silence. I doubted the others even had any inkling that I had been offered UAN citizenship and I was once again impressed with Igor's ability to gain information even in his state of disgrace.

"He's in love with you," he continued. "And even if he isn't, if you make allegations of a homosexual relationship between the two of you, he will be ruined."

"There is no such relationship between us," I replied through gritted teeth.

"Of course not," Igor said as much to mollify me as anything else. "Otherwise you wouldn't be pining away for the girl in the picture day after day. But if you say there is one, then everyone will believe you. He took you out of here enough nights to do God knows what."

"You mean *you* don't know why?"

"No," he admitted. "I could never find out."

This small victory brought me a bit of satisfaction. But it wasn't enough. "I won't do it."

"You'll do it," said Carlos, who had been listening with rapt attention.

"It's disgusting," I said, looking directly at him. I turned back to Igor. "Think of something else."

Igor thought a moment. "If you can get him to leave the room, you can steal it. I doubt it would go noticed right away."

"No," Jesse said. "Blackmail him. Turn him as white as the towel he wears on his head."

"Samud doesn't wear a turban," I said.

"Shut up!"

"She's right," Carlos said. "If we can buy Samud, that'll give us a huge advantage. Maybe he can even get us out of New York *without* having to escape."

Igor shrugged. "I hadn't thought of that."

"It's settled then," said Carlos, looking at the clock on his table.

"It's not settled," I cried and I knew that my voice had risen too high. We sat for a moment in silence, waiting for a guard to knock on the door.

We were lucky.

“Even if it’s all true, I won’t do it. It’s a horrible thing to do to someone.”

Igor laughed. “He’s your friend, is he?” I hadn’t said it, but I suppose it had been plain on my face. I had considered Samud a friend. I had always looked forward to meeting with him. I never suspected him of feeling anything more and I wasn’t sure I believed it now. But Igor was determined. “Look where you live and what you do? At the end of the day, you’re a prisoner the same as all of us. Don’t let your loyalties get all screwed up because of a few nice games of chess.”

I looked at each of them. Aside from Doreen, they all made me sick. Personally I would choose Samud over any one of them.

“I won’t do it,” I said, and then we were out of time.

I had hoped that Lydia would back me up, but she took their side. In fact, she had a better idea than actually going into the Lincoln Tunnel. When she had been running refugees out of the city with Warren Li, they had used an access corridor that was attached to the Lincoln Tunnel. Since Warren had been killed in Manhattan during a rescue, she was sure that the corridor had never been discovered. It would be much safer and much less conspicuous than using the actual tunnel. Once on the Jersey side, we would be able to easily blend into the scenery while we made the long journey to Pennsylvania.

“Listen to me,” she said over dinner and she took one of my hands into both of hers. “I know that this violates everything that you think is decent, but there isn’t any other way. We have to get out. You need to get to your family as much as I need to get to Daniel.”

I took my hand away from hers and continued to eat. I felt very much alone and began to wonder if it was still possible to just have Carlos break my nose.

As the days continued to pass, I stayed away from my group of co-conspirators. I was told to meet in Carlos’ room at midnight and refused to show. Igor came to collect me once but I sent him away. They sent Lydia the next night and Carlos the night after that. Carlos threatened to drag me by force, but it was a bluff. We would have both been caught.

On the evening of the sixteenth of December, during the socialization period, Jonah Jones came and sat across from me. I was just looking at the picture of Jennie and thinking how much I just wanted to see her.

Jonah, quite out of character, waited for me to acknowledge him before speaking.

"Mathew," he said to me. "We've been collecting supplies for two weeks. We've got enough food and water and lights for all of us and we're ready to go. We even pulled enough for you. Please help us to get home."

He didn't wait for a reply. He just got up and walked away. I sat there, looking at the picture of Jennie, thinking only of Jennie. What they were asking me to do made me feel vile. But I looked at the face of Jennie and then I looked up at the six of them, all sitting together. They turned away quickly, even Jesse, who normally wouldn't. Of all of them, it was Jonah Jones who was the person I thought most deserved to get out. Jonah Jones, who had entered my life as a gibbering pest, was the one of them whose heart was golden. I wondered if they had even told him what it was they expected me to do.

Gathering my courage, I approached one of the guards, one of those who had delivered messages to Samud in the past, and asked him to tell my friend that I would like to see him.

They didn't dare talk to me, the others. They could sense my mood and my irritation and so left me alone the next night at dinner and during socialization. Of course, they knew that I had acquiesced. All they could do now was wait.

For my part, I did not expect Samud to honor my request, nor to respond very quickly. So it was much to my surprise that I found him waiting for me in my room when I returned there after the socialization period. Upon seeing him, I froze, standing on the threshold of my open door, my escort standing behind me, waiting for me to close the door. He still had several others to return to their rooms.

"Please come in," Samud said. "You're holding up the others."

Regaining some semblance of composure, I did as I was asked and closed the door behind me. Footsteps retreated down the hall behind the closed door. Before saying anything, I studied my visitor. He seemed a little more uncertain than the man I had come to know. He blinked a lot. We stood facing each other for a while. We were what we were. Two friends who needed to mend fences before continuing on.

"I'm not sorry," I said.

He nodded. "I didn't expect that you would be. I expected you wanted to see me about your escape plan."

He was trying to surprise me, catch me off guard. Though I hadn't expected him to know about it, I found that I wasn't surprised that he did. After all, I had been seen speaking with Carlos and it was probably no secret that I had visited him once during the night and Lydia, who had become a regular acquaintance of mine, had probably been to his room many times. No, there were no surprises there.

"I need a map of the subway tunnels," I told him.

He raised his eyebrows. At least *I* had surprised *him*. "Why would you want to go down into those filthy tunnels?"

"Because you'll never find us there."

He considered this. "I suppose I just assumed you would want to get out of the city."

"I don't need to tell you the whole plan."

"Then why should I give you the map?"

I took a breath, but there was really no need for the hesitation. My mind had already been made up. "Because we're friends."

"Friends are we?"

I nodded. "In the end, I think so."

He didn't reply.

"Samud, I need to get out of here. You and I both know that I'm eventually going to skip through time again. This time I may lose ten years or fifty years. I need to see my family and I need to see Jennie before that happens. I'm begging you."

He laughed at me. He actually laughed at me. "*That's* your plan? *That's* how you expected to convince me to give you the map?"

I became suddenly angry. "No," I said very quietly. "The plan was to use coercion."

All hints of laughter stopped instantly. "What sort of coercion?"

Curiosity is the first sign of guilt.

"It doesn't matter," I told him. "I told them I wouldn't do it and I won't. If you won't help me, then you'd better just go."

"I cannot get you the map," he admitted after a moment. "I cannot go back to my office."

Maybe I'm just dense, but I didn't see what he meant at first. I just looked at him queerly, trying to figure it all out. He didn't wait long for it all to come to me.

"Dr. Miktoffin was arrested earlier this evening. It seems he was conducting some sort of secret research using misappropriated resources."

It became very clear to me, then, exactly what was going.

"They've traced it back to you?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. But Abdel, as dedicated a man as he is, will tell them anything they want to know as soon as they shine a bright light in his face."

"And then?"

He shrugged. "As a doctor, he may very well buy his life, if not his freedom. There will be no further use for me."

"So you didn't come because I asked you. You came... Why did you come?"

"Because you are in as much danger as I am. Maybe more." I started to speak, but he put up his hand to stop me. "If they determine that Abdel's research was worthwhile, they may have him continue it. In that case, you would be taken to a lab and caged. You won't like it."

I thought about that for a minute, wondering how different it would be from the way things were. I looked up. "What if they don't think his research is worthwhile?"

"Then they will look to eliminate all traces of its existence."

Including the subject, I guessed.

"I had hoped," he began, "that your plan would be more fully realized. I had hoped that I could join you."

I thought of that. I thought of Carlos' reaction to it. He would not like it. None of them would *like* it. But Carlos would likely melt down. In order to be accepted, Samud would need to bring something to the plan. Like a subway map. Or...

"Do you have a car that can take us all?"

He nodded. "How does that fit in with your subway plan?"

"It doesn't," I said. "But it makes work an older plan."

If nothing else can be said about Samud, he was an excellent decision maker. It was probably how he had risen to his position so quickly. And also probably why he had fallen. The decision to pursue the time jumping research had taken him no time to make, but the risk involved had been too much. Apparently, his choice of co-conspirators had been too quick a decision as well. I was wondering how well this choice would work for him.

At the moment, he still had some power over the guards. While he anticipated a formal announcement of an arrest warrant within a short amount of time, it hadn't come yet and he would use his name and his soon to be former position wisely. He marched us out of my room, the last time I would see that room, and past the guards into the stairwell.

"We must gather the others quickly and leave," he said.

But I didn't know where any of their rooms were, except Carlos'. He could have found out from the register, but that would have taken time and we didn't have time. Instead, we gambled that Carlos would have more information. At the very least, he would know where Doreen's room was. But the big fish was Igor. He would know where everyone lived.

Carlos' reaction was not what I expected. It may be that we took him unawares. In the first place, it was hardly past 8:30 when we knocked on his door. Visitors were unlikely three and a half hours before a shift change. In the second place, we knocked on his door. No one ever knocked. Finally, and I think this was the rub, he was alone. Carlos was a natural leader, but the caliber of his followers was in question. Without them, though, his weaknesses were thrown into sharp relief.

Seeing me first, he was almost quick to anger, but Samud's presence behind me stayed his hand instantly. We pushed our way past him and Samud closed the door.

"We're going tonight," I said.

"What? Now? With him?" His mind was working and I could see what he was thinking. He'd guessed that the blackmail was having a much more potent effect than anticipated.

"Samud has a car. We need to get the others."

A confused Carlos was almost more difficult to manage than a confident Carlos. It seemed that his instinct in such situations was to present obstacles. I ascertained that this was a stalling tactic while he regained his composure. Deep inside the brash hero was a very frightened young man. Remove any element of his control and you remove his armor. Sensing this, and noting my own ability to do so, I explained to him that we could use Samud's clout and car to get us to the tunnel. There we would hopefully have the time to break down and replace the barrier as we had originally intended. I could tell that he was skeptical but he held his tongue. He didn't think me capable of deception which, in his mind at least, equated to trust. That this line of thought was in direct conflict with the possibility that I could have executed blackmail on my friend Samud completely escaped him.

I would like to say that we quickly rounded up the others, but it was not so quickly. Each of them had the same questions and each required answers. Only Igor flashed a wry smile when he opened the door. Since he was the first we went to, it gave up hope for speed, but those hopes were dashed.

At long last, though, we travelled as an uneasy troupe out to the street. Guards double-took at the sight of us and then quickly looked away upon identifying Samud. To his credit, he walked with an easy confidence despite his claim of danger. I suppose anything less would have given us away, but I don't know that I would have been able to manage it in his position. Parked at the curb was a black minivan. I noted with amusement that it was a Toyota and it was not new, although it looked to be in spectacular shape. We climbed aboard, Lydia and Jonas squeezing themselves into the back with Doreen while I took the middle with Jesse. Carlos went first to the driver's seat but Samud rebuffed him unkindly. I thought there was going to be an explosion of tempers, but Carlos backed down without more than a glare and took shotgun. With that, Samud started the van up flawlessly and we were on our way.

The interior of the van was spotless and had that new car smell, despite not being a new car. Mounted on the dash was an expensive GPS unit and a radio that blasted an alert not five minutes into our trip. The alert was in Arabic and there was no reason for any of us to suspect that it was anything out of the ordinary but for the fact that Samud's face went pale and Carlos was naturally mistrusting.

"What was that?" he asked. "What did they say?"

"They have issued a warrant for my arrest," Samud answered in an even voice. "They are looking for me."

"Are they looking for us?" Carlos accused. "Are they looking for this car?"

Samud nodded.

Jesse issued a curse.

I could see the anger boiling in our "leader" and braced myself for what was to come. But again Carlos surprised me. I suppose the fact that we were on our way, in action, past the turning point, had leveled him somewhat. His personality could not be concealed but it could be controlled.

Someone suggested we abandon the Toyota.

"We can't," Carlos said. "If we drop it, they'll find it faster and look for us on foot. If we're near the tunnel, it'll kill the whole plan. If we're not, then we'll never make it there."

"So what do we do?" Lydia squeaked from the back.

"Someone's going to have to keep the van on the road. Someone will have to keep driving while the rest of us break open the tunnel."

“So, what?” Jesse accused. “Someone gets left behind?” She glanced back behind her and I could tell she was thinking of Jonas. I didn’t understand what was between them and probably never will, but she seemed to care about him a great deal. When I looked back, he seemed unconcerned.

Samud had the solution. “The person driving the van can circle back around and join the party when the work is almost done. Once the barrier is completely replaced, they will not think to search the tunnel.”

“Oh, that’s much better,” Jesse admonished sarcastically. “Who gets that crappy job?”

Carlos looked back at us, his faithful companions, and I could see his simple mind working through the choices. He would not choose Doreen because, for whatever it was worth, they were lovers. Jesse would never accept the assignment and it wouldn’t be worth his effort to take her on. Besides which, she might turn us in in anger. Jonas, he probably felt, wouldn’t be able to handle the job and Lydia was already on the verge of tears. That left Igor, Samud, and me. Igor was a double-crosser and Samud was a wild card. I was the obvious choice. I was his choice. He didn’t say it, but I could see it in his face every time his eyes fell upon me. I was there because of my time leaping. I was there because I was desperate to see my family again before I was propelled beyond the spans of their lives.

I was there because of Jennie.

And yet for me it was all fleeting. Even if I reached them, how long would I have with them? Though I had been grounded for some time at this point, I was not fool enough to believe that my condition had suddenly erased itself. My time with them would come to a rapid end and I would find myself in another alien situation, fighting to stabilize yet again. Such was my curse. And yet Lydia could live out the rest of her life with her husband. Carlos could be with Doreen. Jesse. Jonas. For them, this escape had value. For me it was just another temporary chapter in my temporary existence.

“I’ll do it,” I said.

Carlos didn’t even acknowledge my acceptance of the job. My volunteering just confirmed his decision and he went straight to directing Samud toward the tunnel. We avoided police cars twice, but managed to stay hidden. When we arrived, everyone piled out of the van and I went round to the driver’s seat. The entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel looked dark and foreboding. The barriers were complete, but I wondered if it would really take anything to slip a person inside. If this

thought occurred to anyone else, it was left unspoken. The die had been cast.

"Look," Carlos said to me as I climbed in. "Try to come back around every twenty minutes or so. If they catch sight of you, don't come back."

"Goodbye, Lydia," I said to her through the open window. There was an October chill in the air, but we were all too keyed up to notice. "Good luck."

"Thank you, Mathew. Thank you."

Before I could pull out, Igor was climbing in beside me.

"What are you doing?"

"If you get caught, you'll need some help talking your way out of a death sentence."

"And you're willing to help me with that?"

There was that wry grin again and I knew Igor was following opportunity. It made me uneasy but Carlos seemed relieved to be rid of the little troll. Samud, though, was less comfortable with the situation. He also volunteered to join us and slid into the middle seats behind us. And now it was complete and Carlos could hope none of us came back because he hated each of us for one reason or another. For my part, I was glad to have Samud and suspicious of the detestable Igor. But the job was still the same and I had never expected to come back to the tunnel anyway.

Without looking back, I pulled away from the entrance and back onto the streets. I began to head uptown, thinking that they might confine their search to the areas of the office and our apartments. But that was a foolish hope at best. It was known that we had a vehicle and that meant that we would have access to the whole city and any of the bridges. Some reports came over the radio, but they were sporadic and, based on Samud's translations, lacking in information. It was possible that they expected he was listening in. Aside from those interruptions the ride was silent as we crossed first to the west side and then back east, always moving in a generally northern direction.

Close to twenty minutes later, Igor began to grow restless. Finally, he couldn't take it any longer. "You're not going back, are you?"

I shook my head.

"I didn't think so. Do you have a plan?"

I shook my head again. "I thought you did."

Samud watched this exchange curiously. I can only guess at what was going through his mind. If I were in his position, I would assume that Igor and I had worked out some sort of truce. Nothing of the sort had

happened, which made me wonder just what was going on in Igor's mind.

He took advantage of my dependence on him and ordered me back to the east, this time to the FDR drive. During the war, I had learned that that particular stretch of road had been blasted off in chunks. Most of the damage had been irreparable but one lane access or better had been restored along most of the stretch for the sake of convenience. Igor suggested that it was a quick and relatively safe route for us. Samud agreed but wanted to know exactly where that route would take us.

Igor smiled his wry smile and said, "Why, the Triboro bridge, of course."

Of course.

Another few minutes took us to the FDR drive and I was able to gain easy access. The roadway was bad, even the restored portions. We bumped along at twenty miles per hour, my irritation growing with each mile. As we passed eighty sixth street a shadowy movement in the rear-view mirror caught my eye. I became distracted and slowed. Here is when Igor chose to make his move. He lashed out with both hands and grabbed hold of the wheel, spinning it to the right. The van lurched and we veered toward the precipice. Recovering much more quickly than I would have believed, I turned the wheel back. The confluence of motion jerked us out of control and we spun haphazardly into the rubble. Without even understanding what was happening, I fought Igor as he tried to plunge us into the river. From his position, there was little Samud could do. He reached forward, perhaps attempting to restrain Igor, but it didn't work. There was no talking. There was no shouting. It was a completely non-verbal conflict.

Ultimately, there was nothing I could do. The job had been done on the first try and all I had accomplished was a delay. As we spun toward the edge I saw movement in every direction. Of course, I couldn't really determine a direction so I just saw movement. Police vehicles, United Arab police vehicles, were approaching the scene rapidly, flooding us in the eerie shafts of light that seem to illuminate just the space they touch. In the disco atmosphere, where the faces of my friend and my enemy kept appearing and disappearing before my eyes, we fell. I was unaware of the fall. There was no lurch and no sense of vertigo beyond that which was caused by the spinning. /Only when we finally hit the water was I aware that we had fallen. Water flooded quickly into the cabin through the open windows.

Before I knew what was happening, Igor was upon me, punching and kicking. His blows were ill timed and his weight unevenly distributed. Though I couldn't well defend against him, he didn't do much damage. But physical damage was not his ultimate goal. With the advantage of position and aggression, he was able to readily force me down into the gathering pool around the driver's seat. I felt his stubby fingers close on my throat. He planned to strangle a drowning man.

Samud was on him quickly, attempting to pull him bodily through the seat division and into the back. But Igor was more of a fighter than we had given him credit for. And he was well motivated, though the source of that motivation was a mystery. A man of opportunity, he had well analyzed exactly what he needed to do in order to accomplish his goal. Holding me down with his good right hand, he fended off the battling Samud with his left. I knew that if I breathed in but one lungful of the fetid water I was done for. He knew it, too. As the chill enveloped me and the last of my strength drained away, I felt finally Samud's success. Igor had been pulled away. But it was too late. I could no longer move, all of my strength spent in holding my breath. It would only be a matter of seconds.

Then I would drown.

I could see nothing through my blurred vision, but strong hands gripped my arms and legs. There was definitely more than one pair of hands. I was pulled quickly and roughly from the river and into the warm night air.

I choked and gasped like the drowning victim I was. The air felt moist and thick as it entered my lungs, but it was air. My head began to clear, but there was so much confusion that I still couldn't get my bearings. Lights shined from everywhere, piercing the night like daggers. Men were talking. Blankets were wrapped around me.

"I'll be damned!"

Those were the first words I can remember understanding. The voice was deep but innocent sounding, almost gleeful. I focused, looking for the speaker and seeing a man who matched his voice exactly. He was a large man with sandy hair and he wore a uniform and a badge, but none as I had ever seen. I tried to speak, but my throat was still constricted so I chose to look instead.

I was on a boat on the river. In front of me was Manhattan Island in all of its lit splendor, as magnificent as it had ever been. The FDR drive, completely repaired, ran in three levels with traffic racing back and forth along it. The shape of the cars looked funny from this distance but I

certainly couldn't make them out for sure. They were travelling faster than I would have expected. All around me, people were fussing. There was the sound of machinery rising above everything else. The man who had spoken stared at me with an open mouthed grin while, behind him, two ladies in white blouses conferred over what appeared to be an electronic clipboard. They, too, wore the unfamiliar badges pinned to their breasts.

"I'll be damned," the first voice repeated. He opened his mouth to say more but was drowned out by a violent noise behind me. I turned quickly to see the appearance of Samud's minivan as it was yanked from the water by a crane. It was covered in algae and rust. The water poured from it in sheets, revealing decomposed upholstery and mechanics. Only minutes ago, it had looked so new.

"What year is it?" I whispered.

"I'll be damned," the man repeated. "Twenty twenty three."

Someone pushed a chair under me and I sat gratefully. Leaning back, I closed my eyes and breathed. Once again, I had leaped. This time, however, fate had played a hand and saved my life from the psychopathic troll who had attacked me. And despite the failure of his attempt, I was now twice removed from my family and twice removed from Jennie. She would no longer be a child. She would be a woman, perhaps with a child of her own. With the passing of nine years, I feared I had probably lost her forever.

"Mr. Cristian?"

It was the same man again and I realized that he had called my name several times. His grin was gone, replaced by a look of concern. I looked back at him, strangely calm. I was not even curious as to how he knew who I was.

"Do you need anything?" he asked.

"I need to rest," I said, thinking of Carlos and their trek through the tunnel, thinking of Samud.

Chapter 4

Mine was a fine room in Cento Towers, a four year old establishment that had taken advantage of real estate prices during the reconstruction. My new friend was a man by the name of Wil Lowenburg. I managed to get that much as he escorted me off of the boat and to the hotel. It was a dark summer night and I was tired. Only as we reached the street did I realize that there was a light rain falling. Being so wet and on a boat in the middle of active waters, I'd had no inkling of the weather. It didn't matter anyway. Wil talked a lot and he asked me questions which I couldn't even interpret let alone answer. I was exhausted from my ordeal and when he showed me my room, I began to strip off my wet clothes without even a second thought. Blushing, he hastily departed. Bedclothes had been laid out upon the bed and I took them up, finding them a perfect fit. Forgetting about my time jump and my murderous companion, I lay down and fell asleep.

When I awoke, it was still dark outside and the clock read 2:58. I don't know how long I slept because I have no idea what time it was when I arrived at that place. What did occur to me, though, was that the time now was not much later than the time I had leaped. Of course, you'd have to take out the nine years in between, though.

The room was nicely furnished and clean clothing had been provided in just my style. Apparently, I had been expected. Gathering my wits, I went quickly to my own clothes, still piled on the floor, and fished out my journal and my wallet. Though wet through, the journal was relatively undamaged. If I let it dry, it would be sadly out of shape but the writing would be intact. I resolved not to play with it until it had dried. The wallet was water logged but there was little in there that would matter anyway. The contents were relics of the past and I decided it was best to shed myself of them. I deposited them into the empty trash can and went to the television set.

TV was not much help. I was glad to see that most of the shows were in English and Spanish again, as opposed to the Arabic I had been seeing for the past several weeks. Far be it from me to condemn a people for

their language, but the sound of it had grown ugly in my ears. Many of the shows were decades old reruns that I had seen in the past. I even managed to kill thirty minutes watching *Gilligan's Island* between 4:00 and 4:30 am. The news was mostly local. Little was discussed that could fill me in on nine years of missing history but I was at least able to ascertain that Americans had once again gained control of America. There were numerous references to Constitutional Amendments I had never heard of. There was also this inundation of the news with a company called GEI.

Just before six o'clock, I decided to test out the shower. It was good and hot, the best shower I'd had in quite some time. Certainly, the United Arab Nation had treated me well, kept me clean and housed and fed. But there was nothing like the comforts of an establishment designed to please its customers. When I came out of the bathroom almost thirty minutes later, I noticed that a small light on the phone was lit. I picked it up, the shape of it strange compared to older phones. It was smaller and thinner. As soon as I held it to my ear, a message recorded in a ladies voice began to repeat.

Please dial 001 for an important message. Please dial 001 for an important message. Please dial 001 for an important message.

And so on.

I put the phone down and the light went off. Curious, but not too curious, I decided to dress first and check on the status of my journal. In almost four hours, it had dried somewhat, but still had a long way to go. I found some plastic shopping bags in the closet and took one for the journal. Then I sat down on the bed and dialed 001.

The important message was from Wil Lowenburg. He wanted me to meet him in the lobby and have breakfast with him. With nothing else to do, I went down straight away, carrying my bag with me. At that hour, the lobby was deserted. There was no sign of Mr. Lowenburg so I approached the desk. At the mention of my name, the clerk picked up the phone and rang him up. Mr. Lowenburg appeared in the lobby a few short minutes later. He was wearing a pale green suit of an unusual cut. But it fit his frame well and didn't look odd even by my outdated standards of style. I was relieved that he had forsaken the badge and uniform of the night before. With a smile and a shake of hands we stepped out of the hotel in search of a place that would seat us so early in the morning.

Wil Lowenburg was an interesting character. His personality was cheerful at all times and he seemed eager to be friendly and make friends. In retrospect, I suppose that was why he was chosen for the job.

I grew to like him almost instantly. There was a boyish charm about him that made it almost impossible not to. We began talking almost immediately as we walked. He was naturally curious about me, so much so that I was temporarily able to forget my ongoing predicament and my instinctive curiosity about the world in which I had arrived.

His first question to me was, "Are you really from the past?"

I was, of course, but I didn't answer him right away. The truth is that I had never really considered it from that perspective. When thrust out of the normal sequence as I have been, there is so little opportunity for reflection. My journey was beyond my capacity to control so I spent all my effort in just surviving. But the lack of control did not belie the fact that I was a time traveler. Even though this particular time period was within the bounds of my natural existence, I was still from the past, being catapulted into the future at an unknowable rate. Being from the past made me wonder if I could return to it somehow.

"I'll be damned," he cried ecstatically when I finally did give him my answer.

He wanted to know all about it and all about my life. I was very general in my description, afraid to give away details which might land me into trouble. My experience was making a cautious man out of me. He did ask me when it had all started and I remembered back to that first spilled cup of coffee. That had been in April of 2007.

"I'll be damned!" he cried again. And by this time we were entering an empty diner on the corner of 82nd street.

Our conversation over breakfast was light and pleasant and he kept checking his watch. I supposed there was an appointment we had to keep and I was right. Here now, I will write what I learned from him at that meeting. I find myself once again in the position of having to annotate years of history in just a few paragraphs but so much of it is relevant to me and my situation that it would be neglectful to leave it absent.

The day of our escape from New York and the United Arab Nation marked the beginning of the end of their occupation. And there was a direct correlation between the two events. The name of Jesse Cataldo had become one known in every household. She had led four people on foot across the states of New Jersey and Pennsylvania in a desperate attempt to be liberated from the terrible clutches of the evil Arab Empire. Or so it was told. I have since been able to look up some of the periodicals of the time and, yes, the tortures endured by the prisoners were described in frighteningly inaccurate detail. So it was to be a lie. As was the fate of Carlos Castillo, who did not arrive with his party.

Apparently, it was under his brave leadership that the escape had been planned, but he had not lived to see its execution.

In the months that followed, the United States government began making queries and accusations. There were demands for the release of thousands of prisoners. Here there was a drastic contradiction between what I had learned from Samud and what was recorded as history. Samud had told me that the work details were maintained by people awaiting acceptance of their manifests. His contention was that the United States was responsible for the delays. The United States government claimed not to have knowledge of just exactly how many of its citizens were being held. Officials produced records of manifests and the dates of issue and dates of acceptance were very close together despite the interminable wait we'd had to endure at the time. I can't say who had fabricated the bigger lie, but it didn't matter at this point. The government trotted out its martyrs and managed to regain the sympathies of the United Nations and the world at large.

Over the intervening years, the government began to make efforts to regain lost territories. These efforts came in the form of reparations for displaced citizens. The U.N. was as weak a power then as it had been before the war so little could be done from a legal standpoint. But the president at the time was a shrewd lady and she began to draw military support from South America and some East Asian countries. The way Wil described it, there was a looming threat but no overt action. That was when GEI stepped in. A fledgling company at the time (2018), it began pouring money into borderline property and reconstruction. Its shareholders became very rich and negotiations between the corporate offices and the United Arab government went into motion. Before long, the officers of GEI had negotiated an accord between the American and Arab governments whereby the United Arab Nation would abandon the property it had gained in the invasion. This property would once again become U.S. territory, a substantial amount of which would fall under the ownership of GEI. This fast growing company would then pay cash settlements to the Arab government over the course of twelve years and numerous government officials would be granted shares of the company. Over the course of the last five years, the payments had been made and those shares had found their way back into U.S. citizen hands.

Wil spoke of this with immense pride, as if he himself had been a party to it all and it was then that I finally recognized the symbol on the badge he had worn the night before.

"You work for GEI?"

"Yes, sir," he declared.

"And you knew exactly where I was going to be? And when?"

"Well, we knew the where but I don't think anyone was sure of the when. Hell, most of us didn't think you'd ever show up."

"How long were you there?"

"You mean yesterday?"

"I mean when did they start guarding the spot?"

"Two years, give or take."

Two years. That was a long time to pay people to wait around for me to show up. "Why?"

Wil looked at his watch again and smiled. "It's almost eight. Do you want to go to corporate headquarters now?"

The question was so out of place that I didn't know how to respond. Why would I want to go to corporate headquarters? But Wil was already paying the bill and gesturing that I should move along. So I did. What else could I do?

Corporate headquarters wasn't far from the diner. We walked it. On the way, Wil told me about Alexis Asosvskiy. She was the CEO of GEI. Any operation run by the company passed over her desk in the form of a digital document. Nothing got started without her seal of approval and nothing continued if she grew tired of it. Wil tried his best to cast her in a favorable light, but I could read between the lines. He did not like her. No one liked her. I wasn't surprised.

I was led into a tall glass building and ushered into an elevator. Somewhere along the way, we were joined by security officers. I was either very dangerous or very important and I have never in my life felt very dangerous. The elevator took us to the 52nd floor without stopping. The doors whooshed open and I stepped out into the lobby of what could have been any office from any era. I'd barely had time to gather my wits when a large door on the left opened up and admitted Alexis Asosvskiy.

Ms. Asosvskiy was a tall woman with a slender frame. She wore a ladies business suit with a skirt and sharply buttoned white blouse. Her hair was cut unevenly but even I could tell that it was a style of some sort. I didn't care for it, but I chose not to say anything. As if that was a choice. She came forward with a gleaming smile and took hold of my limp hand, vigorously shaking it. Then she thanked Wil, calling him Mr, Lowenburg, and we were in her office alone with the door closed behind us.

Standing stupidly in the lavish office, I looked behind me once and then around me once. I took in the office without taking it in at all. It

was a business office, not meant to be a second home. There was no sofa and there was no bar or refrigerator. But there was a desk, the likes of which I have never seen before. Digital picture frames sat on the desk and hung on the walls, their images changing from scenes of nature to scenes of family to scenes I could not describe. Ms. Asosvskiy offered me a seat so I took a comfortable leather chair as my own and tried to relax.

"I have thought several times about shutting down the Mathew Cristian project," she said to me. "I'm glad it's over."

"I'm sorry," I said, because I could think of nothing else.

She waved me away. "Certainly not your fault, Mr. Cristian. How could you have known that this company was pouring tens of millions of dollars into your existence every year."

"Why didn't you just shut it down, then?"

I noticed that she did not sit, not even on the corner of the desk. It was a power play and she was a powerful woman. I was intimidated in spite of myself.

"I don't have that authority. This project was of a special interest to our founder and primary shareholder. He is a very stubborn man."

"What's his interest in me?"

"He knows you. I daresay he knows all about you?"

I sat silently then, waiting for her to dispense with the drama. She was goading me, I could see it. There would really be no harm in me asking who this person was, but I had developed something of a stubborn streak and managed to hold my tongue.

"He would like to meet with you." When it was apparent that I would continue to maintain my silence, she continued. "He's concerned that you might not want to meet with him."

"Who is he?" I finally blurted, feeling as if I had lost a staring contest.

It was Igor Grundel and I was surprised by it. I'm not sure who I expected if I even expected anyone. A lot of names, though, wouldn't have surprised me and as I reflect upon it now, I think some of the more likely options would have been Samud or one of the Tiris or even Jonah Jones. But Igor... The initial shock passed quickly leaving me enraged.

Ms. Asosvskiy looked uncharacteristically sheepish. "He said you might not be glad to hear his name."

"He tried to kill me!" I shouted.

"He didn't really discuss the details of what happened between you nine years ago..."

"It was *yesterday!*"

She quieted and I sensed all background activity outside the office door to have stopped as well. There was a long and uncomfortable pause as everyone tried to regain his and her composure. I was trembling with rage. I felt violated. I still didn't understand why Igor had done it, but the fact that he had poured time and money into saving my life nine years later cheapened it somehow. What was the point? Had he saved me so that he could have his opportunity to murder me once again?

"What does he want?" I asked.

"He wants to see you."

"No."

"He thought you might feel that way."

I didn't say anything. What could I say? My anger was dissipating but not dissipated. I wished never to see him again.

Ms. Asosvskiy said, "It's Thursday, Mr. Cristian, and your room is paid for through Sunday. Mr. Grundel has instructed that you may enjoy its comforts through that time and then you're free to go off on your own."

"Thank you," I said quietly. When there was nothing more, I stood up and went for the door of the office. She didn't try to stop me.

I spent the remainder of the afternoon watching television and trying to figure out what I was going to do next. I had already decided that I wouldn't be staying at the Cento Towers through the end of the week. I would have much preferred to leave the hotel immediately but I needed a plan first.

When evening came, I was still without one. Of course I thought of my family and of Jennie. I thought of my strange affliction. I thought of Igor Grundel. Nothing gave me a direction. I was more lost now than ever I had been. The world into which I had been born no longer existed. Declared dead years ago, I had no identity. The money I had carefully planted into a growing bank account had long since been gobbled up by bureaucracy. I was homeless, penniless, and alone.

As I expected he would, Igor Grundel came to visit me that night. I had hoped he would wait a day, but he must have anticipated my intention to leave. In truth, if I had really wanted to avoid seeing him I should have never returned to the hotel. But apparently I am human and found the comforts of that room irresistible.

"Hello, Mat," he said.

I looked behind him and around him. Just seeing him brought about an embarrassing fear. But he was no danger. He looked much older now. His rounded posture had grown hunched and there were grey spots throughout his thinning hair. Though he would never be a pretty man, he was dressed well, very well fed, and smelled expensive. He was carrying a briefcase. In the intervening time he had made a lot of money and chosen to flaunt it. I stepped aside to allow him entry.

"Alexis was upset by your meeting. She said that you were not what she expected."

There was no response to this so I went to the television and turned it off.

"Are you going to talk to me?"

"Why should I talk to you?"

"I saved your life."

"No you didn't." I wouldn't look at him.

"Nine years have gone by," he said quietly. "And I still remember the look on your face. I can still see you struggling to break free, certain that you were going to drown. I can feel your neck in my hand."

These images chilled me. It was as if I was living my own murder as the murderer.

"And then you were gone."

I still don't know whether or not he expected me to respond, but I didn't. I wanted to walk away from him, even shrink away from him.

He was nothing, just this small old man and he made me feel scared and weak. It was the confidence in the money he possessed and the power he commanded. It was the fact that he had virtually succeeded in murdering me, thwarted only by a happenstance that no one could ever have foreseen.

"I wondered about it for a long time. I obsessed over it..."

"What happened to Samud?"

There was a look on his face that passed away briefly. But I had seen it even if I cannot even now interpret it.

"We were both taken into custody. I was treated well but I doubt Samud was given the same courtesy."

"You sold him out?"

He nodded, his white fingers growing even whiter around the handle of the briefcase. "I'm not proud of it. I'm not proud of a lot of my past. But the impact of our escape was devastating on the UAN's occupation and they knew it would be. They needed a scapegoat."

"Did they kill him?"

"I don't know for sure." Then he added, "Probably."

Samud was my friend. Nine years later he would still have been my friend. When I thought of him, I saw a loyalty that extended to his friends before his government. He had broken the rules to help Dr. Miktoffin and he had used his last shred of influence to help me. I remembered his struggle with Igor as he fought to save my life. I remember Samud. I remember my friend.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"I've put a lot of time and money into the study of this time jumping thing that you do. Even now, I'm supporting a research facility in the Colorado Rockies."

"Have you found a cure?"

He shook his head, but I could see his rat's eyes glittering. With the conversation now steered in the proper direction, he had me just where he wanted me. It was true whether I admitted or not, so I admitted it to myself then as I admit to you now.

"We only have thirteen subjects, but there are a few good leads on some more. You, Mat, are the best possible subject we could have, though."

I definitely did not like the use of the term *subject*. I had been Dr. Miktoffin's subject and suffered without result. I did not want to go from being Igor Grundel's victim twice over to being his subject.

He continued without pause. "Yours is the most documented case in history. A lot of that has to do with you going to the hospital and the psychiatrist. I..."

His eyes focused on the white bag which held my journal. A bit of the corner of the book was peeking out from where it lay on the dresser table.

"Is that your journal?" he asked.

With a look at the subject of his interest, I nodded.

He actually licked his lips. "May I see it?"

"It's private."

"Oh." He withdrew his hand and only then did I realize that he had been reaching for the book. I maneuvered myself between it and him protectively. "Well, I'd like you to join us in the Rockies. I think having your help would go a long way toward finding a cure."

I laughed at him then and it was a good, natural laugh. He couldn't possibly think that I would submit myself as a specimen for his purposes. Perhaps he had conned thirteen other people into giving up their

lives, but I had just spent six months as someone's prisoner. A gilded cage is still a cage.

"I think instead I'll tell people who and what you really are."

He smiled and in that smile I saw the Igor Grundel from nine years earlier. The confident business tycoon had faded, replaced by the con-ning little rat that had steered me into the river so that he could murder me.

"You ruined me once, Mat and I tried to kill you for it. This time, if you try it, you'll just end up burying yourself."

I didn't understand and he was all too happy to explain.

"Even if anyone believes you, the publicity will be the end of you. The problem with being the most well documented case of time skipping is that yours is a household name in certain circles. You don't think that GEI is the only company working on this, do you? We actually do it in secret. If the government got their hands on you, they'd put you into a facility that would be make a gulag look like a resort."

"You're lying."

That very same smile. Hefting the briefcase, he said, "May I?"

He didn't wait for a response. He laid it on the bed and opened it up. Inside, I could see a handful of objects, the most prominent of which was a laptop computer. He ignored this and reached into one of the smaller pockets, drawing out what looked like a USB flash drive. I was not particularly computer savvy but the things had been pretty commonly passed around at my old office. The tip looked a bit different, but I guess the concept was the same. He plugged it into the TV set. When he switched the TV on, a menu came up that looked similar to a file list on any home computer. Using the remote, he scanned through the files until he came to one that was entitled *morrisY.mpx*. Once selected, I was shocked to see my old friend Morty standing at the street curb. The quality was bad and the camera angle was bad. It had been filmed from the other side of a wide Manhattan street, probably on someone's cell phone.

"What is this?" I choked, knowing what I was going to see. It happened so fast. One minute, he was standing, checking the road for traffic and the next he was tumbling into the path of an oncoming bus. There was no sound, but the effect was not lost for it. He was taken so quickly, his body catapulted off camera, that there wasn't even the hint of blood or gore. Still it was the most disturbing thing I had ever witnessed. I couldn't speak.

"Did you see it?" he asked.

I looked at him, my cheeks filled with blood, my eyes blazing. Why would he show me this?

"Did you see it?"

"See *what?!?*" I shouted.

Before I knew it he was playing it again. I took a step toward him only to grab the remote from his hand, but my expression must have telegraphed a much more sinister purpose. He took a step back. His smile had faded.

"Watch," he said quietly. "Look behind him."

I looked in spite of myself, deliberately focusing not on Morty but on the people around him, behind him. And I saw it. There was a man, a young man, dressed in a regular business suit. He was talking on his cell phone, but casually put it away and, with both hands, shoved Morty into the gutter at just the right time.

"My God," I breathed. "Where did you get this?"

He snorted. "You don't want to know. If they knew that I had this, I'd be a dead man myself. This was an accidental video in an era of accidental videos. The man who pushed your friend into traffic is an agent of the government. Without any real idea of what they were dealing with or any plan on how to deal with it, they were hell bent on keeping this time skipping thing a secret. Morris was killed because he believed you.

"There's no video of the assassination of your psychiatrist," he added as an afterthought.

I was breathless and scared. In some dark corner of my mind I knew what he was doing. Even if it was all true, he was using it to win my friendship. He put fear into me and stepped in front of my enemies like a shining knight. It almost worked, too. Even the bodies and wreckage in the ruined New York had not been more horrible than that video. Even hearing Jennie's story and seeing her exact retribution had been easier to witness. What had been done to Morty had been done in an entirely different world. That world was supposed to have been safe. Sane.

But no spinning of words could hide the premature look of triumph on Igor's face.

"I won't go," I whispered.

He breathed deeply, not defeated just yet. Reaching into his briefcase, he pulled out his last best weapon. It was a cell phone. I suppose that in the intervening time, the phones with Internet capability and touch screen had become the rule rather than the exception. Who knew how

much they cost? For what I was used to, this phone was extremely advanced and powerful. It truly was a pocket computer. Before handing it over to me, he tapped on the screen a few times. I looked at the screen and read the Wisconsin address printed there. It was Jeremy's address.

I took a moment to register what it was that I was seeing. I knew the address was correct because I had seen it before. Samud had given me a folder with all of my family's information. I had left that folder on the bookshelf in my room when we had escaped. Frantically, although it didn't show, I began to try and commit the address to memory.

"You may keep the phone," Igor offered.

I looked up at him, back down at the phone. "I don't want it," I said. "You might call me."

He laughed at that. "You may be certain of that! Still, I can't make you answer it."

That was true, but who knew what went into devices. Even back in my time there had been satellite tracking of phones. This would give him a way to keep tabs on me wherever I went.

He must have sensed my further trepidation. "I'll make you a deal. If you keep the phone, I can have you on your brother's doorstep in time for dinner tomorrow evening."

I hesitated still. Even without any money or any identity, I could still probably find my way to Wisconsin. Once there, I could somehow track down my brothers. It was a tempting offer, but it wasn't enough. I shoved the phone back at him, taking some small satisfaction at the look of astonishment on his face.

He didn't reach for it. "You are that determined to put me out of your life?"

I nodded.

He nodded also. "Then I must up the offer with the very last thing that I have."

"You have nothing that I want."

"I have the resources to find the girl in the picture."

I truly didn't understand him. "What girl? What picture?"

"The picture you spent your evenings staring at when we were in the work group together. You never told me her name."

"Jennie," I whispered. "Her name is Jennie."

"Mmmm. If you happen to know Jennie's last name, I would certainly be able to find her for you."

I have never hated anyone as much as I hated Igor Grundel at that moment. A man of opportunity, he had never missed an observation. At

that moment, he had me. And he and I both knew it beyond the shadow of a doubt.

True to his word, Igor put me on a plane to Wisconsin the next morning. The flight was just under three hours and landed at a large airport in Green Bay. I was amazed at how little airline travel had changed. I disembarked the plane stiff and feeling as if a cold was coming on. It was early afternoon by then and I had some lunch at the airport while I waited for a car to collect me. I was very surprised to find that the driver was Wil Lowenburg.

"When did they fly you out here?" I asked.

He seemed a bit sheepish. "Well, Mr. Cristian, to tell you the truth, I was on the same plane as you. I'd've picked you up sooner, but I had a little trouble getting the car."

"So you're my chaperone?"

He didn't answer. Surprisingly enough, I found that I didn't mind so much. I told him so and it seemed to brighten his day.

We drove out of the airport under a bright early afternoon sun and I spent two more hours in the car staring out at the glory of cheese country.

Cars weren't so different now. I didn't see one gas station or a sign for one so I began to wonder. I asked Wil about it and he confirmed that cars ran on different fuel sources. There were pros and cons to all of them and you made your choice when you bought the car. As far as fueling it up, pumping stations had become a thing of the past. Electric cars were charged and the ones that ran on corn oil ran on the same corn oil that you could get at the store. So you just filled your car up. Most of the changes had come about during the Arab occupation. The president at the time figured that the country was so screwed up anyway that putting thousands of gas stations out of business couldn't be so bad.

It was pretty bad.

We arrived shortly after three o'clock and I had Wil pull the car over at the end of the community. It was a tiny town with a population of only a few hundred people. Each of the houses was built on a stretch of sprawling property. Jeremy and Wyatt's property cut through some woodland and there was a path that had been cut through years before. Sitting in the car, I stared up the house, the quarter mile path that led from the mailbox to the front door, and wondered how best to approach. In playing with the phone, I had become pretty adept with its tools. Jeremy's number was in there in case I wanted to call him, but I

didn't think a phone call was the best way to introduce myself after all of those years. I wanted to see them in person. I wanted to see their reactions and know exactly what they felt.

And that was the source of my hesitation. There had been some conflict between us when last we had parted. They had never really believed in my condition and had blamed me badly for not being there when my mother had died. Though I had gotten my share of the inheritance, I had been completely shunned. I had not seen them at all during my last sequence and not the sequence before. For them it had been at least fifteen years since our last contact.

Wil Lowenburg looked back at me and smiled his best country boy reassuring smile. I tried something like it back, failed, and got out of the car. Behind me, he slid down the window and told me that I should call him if I needed anything.

I took the walk up the drive like a man taking his final few steps down death row. I didn't know how I would react if I were to be shut out again. It briefly occurred to me that if Martie answered the door she would as likely spit in my face as alert one of my brothers to my appearance. It was Friday and it was still the middle of the work day so I was expecting to have to face that eventuality.

I don't know how long I stood in front of the door, the car at the foot of the drive, Wil Lowenburg in the driver's seat, probably looking at me intensely. Finally, though, I rang the bell.

After a short time, I heard some shuffling behind the door and an unfamiliar and gruff voice called out, "Who is it?"

I stood frozen for a moment, thinking Igor had double-crossed me somehow. But, no, his information matched the information Samud had given me nine years earlier.

"It's Mathew," I answered back, then added, "Mathew Cristian."

The door opened and there, to my surprise, stood Wyatt. I recognized him immediately, but I saw him as an old man. He was in his mid fifties now, not really old but old enough that the change in him, for me, was drastic. There were silver shoots running through his hair and he had grown a mustache and beard. I suppose that if we weren't brothers I might never have known it was him after all that time. But, of course, he knew me. I had aged but a few months in the intervening time. I'm sure that I looked worn and haggard despite my two night stay in the luxury Cento, but I was now twenty years younger than the brother who had been born just four years before me.

He looked me over in an instant, then reached forward with both arms and grabbed me up in a tight hug. I couldn't do anything but return his affection, so overwhelmed by it as I was. At that moment, it all came crashing down on me and then spilled away. Every emotion that I had been controlling and bottling up over all of this time was diffused and released. My fingers pressed into his back as his did into mine and I felt tears on my cheeks. When we finally pushed each other away, his were wet too. I glanced back at the road but Wil Lowenburg was gone.

My reunion with Jeremy was much the same. When we could all finally speak, they were falling all over themselves to apologize for doubting me and taking out their resentment on me. Forgiving them for their perceived transgressions was easy since I had never really been angry with them in the first place. I had been hurt, left alone, but never angry. Those days had reminded me how important my family was to me. Apparently, it had reminded them of the same thing. Together again, now, we were whole.

Their wives were also about. Attenda greeted me with genuine affection. Whether she was glad to see me because of me or because of the clear burden it lifted off of Wyatt's shoulders I couldn't say. But it didn't matter. Martie was cordial, but her animosity toward me had not dissipated over the years. The proof of my condition and my reappearance seemed to irritate her.

Over dinner and dessert and a late night, we shared stories. They were so interested in my stories that I could hardly get anything out of them for some time. I told them about New York during the occupation and spent an inordinate amount of time talking about Jennie. Attenda glowed as I spoke about the young girl, sensing my feelings for her and obviously approving. Even Martie softened up until I got to the part where Jennie had taken vengeance for her brutalized friend. She reacted forcefully, shouting *That's Horrible!* before she could control herself. At least she had the decency to look sheepish afterwards.

Finally, I got them to talk about their lives. It had been more than thirteen years since they had moved to Wisconsin. Having lived outside of New York City, they were safe from the earliest attacks, but those outlying areas had been evacuated quickly on buses and trains. No one had been allowed more than one bag and that bag hardly more than a carry-on size. There had been a mad rush to keep track of the children as they abandoned their houses, their belongings, and their lives. Wyatt told of Jeremy's decision to send them all on ahead while he fought his way

deeper into the city in an effort to find me. They had argued, Martie strongest, against him going. In this case, I couldn't blame her. She needed her husband more than anyone needed anyone. But Jeremy had dug his heels in and went to find me. He was unsuccessful of course and came close to being captured. But he had found his way onto one of the very last buses and rejoined his family three months later.

Their lives after that were turmoil. They were refugees in their own country and they were housed in stadiums and convention halls and old apartment buildings. Jack enlisted soon after and went to fight. Though I knew the outcome of his decision, I let Jeremy tell the story, tears in his eyes. At that point Martie got up and left the room. I suppose she went to bed because she didn't return. Once again, I didn't blame her.

Almost three years after having been displaced, the United States government began to find relief money for the refugees. In addition, lost assets were found and people were able to finally get back on their feet. With the relief and institutions clamoring to give out loans to the displaced people of the Northeast, Jeremy and Wyatt were able to pool their resources together and buy a house for the two families to share. They had meant it to be temporary, until they could each go their own separate ways. But time had passed, children had grown, and my brothers decided that they liked sharing a residence.

Livvie had gone on to college and become a journalist. She was currently working as a staff writer for a news station in Los Angeles. She was married with two children. It was amazing to me to think of Livvie as a grown up woman with a career and a family. I still saw her as the teenage girl who had the decency to show affection for her funny uncle. Of course, for me, that wasn't so long ago.

Devin had gone back to New York as soon as he had graduated high school. Wyatt confided in me that tensions had arisen between the two of them and it was good that they only saw each other a few times a year. Devin, now twenty two years old, had joined the police force.

As the evening wound down and we all grew sleepy, Attenda showed me to the guest bedroom. It was all set up as if they had been expecting me and Attenda seemed as surprised as I was.

"Martie must have set it up," she said with more than a measure of doubt.

I didn't know or care. The bed looked comfortable and inviting so I bid her good night and lay down in my clothing. It was only a moment before I realized that Attenda had not left. I looked up at her, this

serious fifty year old woman who seemed not to feel the years or care about them one way or the other.

"If Mr. Grundel finds Jennie, will you go to her?"

I was so fatigued that I knew the only answer I could give her was, "I don't know."

"You'll go to her, Mathew. You won't be able to stop yourself."

She was right, of course. I had no idea how Jennie would react to seeing me, but I would have to go.

"Your coming here has been a great gift for your brothers," she continued. "I don't know if you really understand how much they care about you. I spent a lot of sleepless nights comforting Wyatt through tears and panic attacks all brought on by losing you."

Maybe I was tired or maybe I'm just dense, but I didn't really see where she was going. I told her as much.

"No one will expect you to stay, Mathew," she said. "No one would want you to give up a chance to be with the woman you love. But don't go tomorrow. Even if you can, just wait the weekend. Give your brothers some time with you."

I agreed with her immediately. Of course I would stay. Did she think that my instinct to see a woman I had left behind as a teenager would outweigh my need to be with my family? She was right.

Igor contacted me the next day with an address. He must have thought I wouldn't answer the phone if he rang so he sent me a text message instead. The message read, *I found her* and listed the New York address (no real surprise there) and, once again, the offer of being escorted to her doorstep. My gut did a flip and I wanted to go right away. But I thought about what Attenda had said and I made myself a promise. I think I needed the time with my brothers as much as they needed the time with me. Maybe more. So I thanked Igor and told him I would contact him when I was ready.

I did not say anything about it at dinner nor at breakfast the next day. I was content in the company of my family and we used a web camera to contact Livvie. She and I spoke for a long time, thrilled to be able to see each other. I met her husband, Robert, and their two children. Jessica was just four years and Freddy was only two months old. The little girl talked a mile a minute about the TV station her mommy worked for and the hospital her daddy worked for. The little boy sucked a pacifier, cried a bit when it was taken away, and then spit up.

I laughed delightedly.

The days passed quickly. I had begun leafing through my journal again. Inside I found the picture of Jennie that Samud had printed for me. She was no longer even the girl in that picture. Nine years had gone by and she would be approaching her thirtieth year. Like Livvie she may very well have married and started a family. What use would it be if I visited her then? If she was happy all I could accomplish was friction. Four days brought us into the next work week and Jeremy and Wyatt were out of the house frequently. Attenda, too, led a busy life and was reviving her old career. Autism in children had risen after the occupation, but Attenda had become worn out and left her work behind her entirely. Only within the last couple of years had she started up again. That left me alone in the house with Martie. Normally that would have upset her, but she seemed to have taken a position of quiet approval towards me. She didn't speak to me really and yet I knew that she was responsible for the fresh towel in the bathroom and the breakfast left on the table for me. I studied her often, realizing that the study of those around me had become a habit. I had done it while working for the UAN and I was doing it now. She was sad, Martie. I did not approach her on it, but I could only assume that the loss of Jack was a wound that had never healed. And it never would.

So I ignored the message with the address that sat in my phone like a lead weight in my stomach. It called to me but I resisted it. But Igor, as always, had his own agenda. He contacted me again on Wednesday.

Jennie Campbell works as a security officer at a high school. She has never been married and has no children

He knew how to get what he wanted and what he wanted right now was to get me back to New York. Eventually he would want me to go to Colorado. I could see his plan as it unfolded. Jennie was just a step toward making me into his guinea pig. How long would I be with her before I came to the realization that I would absolutely have to do everything I could do to help find a cure for my condition? I would have to do anything and everything possible to try and be with Jennie.

But the one piece of the plan that Igor could not execute was getting her to accept me.

Shall I contact her for you?

He would be foolish to do so.

I did not reply to any of his messages. It was my way of getting back at him for holding all of the cards. If I kept him waiting in the dark, perhaps he would feel some of the frustration with which I had been living for so long. Still, I could not put her out of my head and I stayed up late on Thursday night discussing it with Wyatt and Jeremy.

"Mathew, you have to go," Jeremy said to me.

I was a little surprised, especially after what Attenda had said to me, but I was a little bit hurt also. Did they want me to leave already?

Wyatt was nodding in agreement. "You're living your life a few months at a time. Then you're reborn and you have to adjust again."

"Your last jump was nine years. The next one may be twenty," Jeremy continued. "We'll be here for you then. We'll be old, but we'll be here."

"She won't," Wyatt finished.

We talked longer but the words are just a blur. They were right and I knew it. What's more, I knew that they were advising me out of their love for me, not any desire to be rid of me. At one point I saw something in Wyatt's eyes that gave away his feelings entirely. There was no way we could know whether or not we would ever be able to see each other again. This could very well be goodbye forever. It was the most difficult decision I had ever had to execute in my entire life.

That night I called Wil Lowenburg and told him what I wanted to do.

The next day I spoke with Livvie again and cried and I said goodbye to her as well. I promised to find her before...I didn't finish the sentence. We both knew that the before meant before I was propelled beyond the scope of her lifespan.

Wil showed up with the car on time on Saturday morning. I had spent a week with my brothers and their wives. It seemed like but a moment. It seemed like a lifetime.

Before I went, Wyatt typed Devin's address into my phone and made me promise to get in touch with him. Attenda gave me a big hug and a kiss and told me to pass it on to her son. Then she gave me a smaller kiss on my forehead and told me that I should hold onto that one for myself. Martie clung to the shadows beyond the entryway but she never took her eyes from me and I knew that she was not glad to see me go.

My brothers and I wept as we embraced.

And then I was on my way. It should have been a heroic adventure to recapture the heart of the woman I loved. I should have been excited. But I wasn't. Instead, I felt the sickening uncertainty of how she would react to my appearance. It was the same feeling I'd had a week before when approaching my family for the first time. But now it was

compounded by the loss of that very same family. I was depressed and withdrawn. Wil Lowenburg tried a couple of times to strike up a conversation, but I was unresponsive and he gave up trying. On the plane, he sat next to me and read a book saved into the memory of his phone.

I stared out the window.

When we landed we did not stay at the airport to have lunch. Wil mentioned it but I was in a hurry to get to Jennie. I kept playing the scenario over and over in my mind and each time there was a different outcome. I needed to see her already, to know what she was going to do when she saw me. We drove steadily away from the airport and out of the city.

Jennie had a house on Long Island. It wasn't the same as it had always been, but the destruction there had been much less than in the city proper. Many of the neighborhoods had been left standing, though all of the houses had been looted and stood long in disrepair. When the United States had reclaimed the Northeast, they had redeveloped the land and repaired many of the houses. As incentives to draw people back to the region, most of the property had been sold off cheaply and with incentives. Apparently, Jennie had taken advantage of this opportunity to come home.

It was nearing the end of the afternoon when Wil pulled off of the main road and started winding his way through a series of residential streets. It was a nice area, the kind of area in which you wanted to raise kids. The houses stood separate and strong. I told Wil to stop the car and he did, but he said that there were two blocks yet to drive. He even showed it to me on the GPS. I knew it. I could see it. I could get it on my phone. But I wanted to walk. I wanted to approach on foot. I told him he should go. I didn't want that safety net. I especially didn't want Igor Grundel to be my safety net. We argued. Wil seemed generally concerned about me, but I didn't want him to stay and I told him I probably would not call him, even if she turned me away. In the end I was intractable and he couldn't do anything about it. I got out of the car, thanked him for everything, and walked on down the road. I had nothing with me but my journal, Igor's phone, and the clothes on my back.

I was wondering how I would muster up the courage to ring her doorbell as I rounded the corner and saw that she was outside on the lawn. I stopped up short, my heart stopping momentarily. She was much older now. Her hair was shorter and braided back behind her head, revealing the smooth brown skin and naturally soft, yet hardened by experience,

features of her face. She was facing me, but her eyes were staring down at the grass beneath her feet. She looked angry.

At that moment, my feet began to draw me backward. There was no approach. There would be no ringing of the doorbell. I was out in the open. I was exposed. I was petrified with panic.

Finally, she noticed me and looked up.

...and looked down with only the barest of glances.

My heart began to beat again. She hadn't recognized me. Of course, for her it had been years. The last time we had seen each other, it had only been for a minute. She had been dragged onto a bus and sent away. I remembered that scene, remembered the hurt and the pain and not being able to reach her then. Yet we had been so close. Just like now. Could something swoop in between us and take her away from me again?

With that irrational fear suddenly at the forefront of my thoughts, I panicked and shouted her name.

She looked up at me and this time she really looked at me. Maybe years had gone by but I had not changed at all. I was the same man she had been with in a ruined New York City, the same man she had briefly glimpsed at a work camp. She was not surprised to see me, as if she had known all along that I was alive and not this martyr created by a starving government. But she was surprised to see me, as if despite my being alive she could not understand why I would want to come and see her of all people. She did not know how I felt.

She approached me cautiously, walking away from her house and toward the end of the block where I stood petrified. I was sucked into a vacuum. I could see her approaching but couldn't do anything. I couldn't even breathe. But she had no such problems. She came up to me confidently, boldly in fact. There was a grace to her walk and a straightness to her shoulders that hadn't existed years ago. Whatever wounds the United Arab invasion had inflicted upon her had long since healed and scarred over. Would my reappearance reopen those wounds? Had I done the wrong thing in coming?

She was a bit taller than I remembered, probably because she had grown since we had been together. Still I had a few inches on her and stared down the bridge of my nose at her face because my neck would not respond to a command to bend. She stared up at me as well, appraising me in a way I would not dare appraise her. In my eyes she was perfect. In her eyes, I was hardly so.

"You haven't aged," she said to me. At the sound of her voice I nearly collapsed into tears. They say that smell is the sense most responsible for reminding us of our past. In my life I have found that to be so. Nothing dredges up nostalgia like a familiar scent. But Jennie's voice at the moment was a reminder of something that had been separated from me by dimensions. It was a sound that gladdened me incomparably. And yet, there was a hard edge to it. It wasn't the same edge to which I had grown accustomed. This time it was designed to cut me instead of the world at large. That teenaged accent was gone. She sounded comfortable and secure in her use of the language and, with just those three words, she had taught me to respect her as an intelligent adult.

"You look like shit," she continued. "But you haven't aged."

I said nothing because I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Is it true then? How long has it been for you? A month? Two?"

"Six," I said, feeling guilty about something that was completely out of my control.

"Six," she repeated in a whisper, her eyes glassy now. But her tears were a strength, not a vulnerability. "Did you leave me, Mathew? Or was it just a conveniently timed leap into the future?"

"I didn't leave you," I said.

She snorted in disbelief. "Do you know how I felt?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I hated you. Then I hated myself."

"I'm sorry."

"I let them catch me because I just didn't even care anymore. After you stayed with me and supported me and I was ready to... to..."

"Jennie, I'm sorry."

But it was too late. The rage of old had bubbled up to the surface and swept any good feelings she might have had aside. She no longer cared for apologies. They were useless and empty. It didn't matter that I hadn't wanted to go. Or had I? I suddenly began to wonder at the circumstances under which I had leaped. When Jennie had approached me that night I had been frightened of what would come next. Maybe my body had used the leap to escape from that situation. My leap after that had also been during a situation in which I was terrified. Though the fear had been different and sprung from a different source, it had been no more or less potent. I began to think back to my other leaps but couldn't remember all of the circumstances.

But for now there was Jennie and I was still staring down at her and thinking she was perfect while she thought me a monster. Beauty and the beast.

"So what do you want now?" she asked coldly. "Did you just come to apologize?"

"No," I told her.

The last time we had seen each other, it had only been for a minute. She had been dragged onto a bus and sent away. I remembered that scene, remembered the hurt and the pain and not being able to reach her then. Yet we had been so close. Just like now. Could something swoop in between us and take her away from me again?

"I came because I love you."

Her expression remained unchanged, as if she consciously made an effort to keep it so. I felt nothing from her and could think of nothing else to say so I turned and began to walk away. The separation was permanent. The fight was over.

I was on the verge of going around the corner when she called out my name. I turned. I thought I had turned back quickly but I guess she was quicker because I barely had time to react as she launched herself into my arms. I lost my balance and she lost hers and we both tumbled to the ground in a ragged and graceless heap. Fortunately, we fell onto the grass between the sidewalk and the street. I was slow to recover but she was quick and before I knew it she was on top of me and kissing my head and my cheeks and my lips. This is the part where I realize that I'm a human being just like everyone else because all of my defenses dropped. And with them went the fear and the self doubt and the weirdness. I wrapped my arms around her and began kissing her back because it was my instinct to do so. I had wanted her so badly. I truly did love her. And now I had her and it was just exactly everything I had hoped it would be. Everything I had ever watched or read about love was silly and inadequate to the task of describing the feeling. All inhibitions were gone. I wanted to hold her forever.

I never wanted to leap again.

I spent the summer with Jennie. We went once to go and visit my brothers and they were able to meet her and she them. Igor was good enough to fly us out there. Jennie knew him. He had been there before her manifest had come through and after so we had both had the pleasure. I learned that she detested him and we shared many laughs at his expense. She wanted me to take advantage of his "generosity" with no

intention of paying him back. I couldn't and didn't. To begin with, paying him back meant going to the Colorado Rockies facility and submitting myself for tests. I was loath to do so.

The rest of our time was spent learning about each other and discovering our love for one another. I had a hard time remembering that she was my contemporary now instead of a lost teenager, but it must not have come through. That is particularly the kind of thing that would have annoyed her and she would not have let it go.

The rest of what we did that summer is private, not for these pages.

I love Jennie.

I wanted never to be without her but my affliction loomed over us and everything we did. The closer we became, the larger the shadow grew. I would have married her that summer without question and without regret but for the fact that I would one day soon be gone. As the hot days turned into cool nights and September crept over the horizon I knew that I was reaching the end of my tether.

I tried to hide it from her but she read me too well. One thing about Jennie, she didn't play games. She sensed my anxiety and tried to get directly to the root of the problem. I avoided it as best I could but she eventually told me to *cut the shit or go back to Wisconsin*. So I told her. Of course, she felt the same way. It was easier for her to have hope that, perhaps, my time jumping had come to an end, but I knew better. I couldn't stand the anticipation of not knowing when I would be ripped away from her. One day I just wouldn't come home or we would be embracing and suddenly our arms would be empty, separated by the years.

Since she had forced the issue, I told her everything that I had been thinking. My primary concern was Jennie. The next time I returned to regular time, it would be many years later. It could be ten years or it could be a hundred. I had no way of knowing and she certainly couldn't spend her life alone waiting. She didn't want to talk about that aspect of it the way most people don't want to talk about death. But, I told her, it really was a form of death. She would be in her forties and I would still be thirty five. That's not much of an age difference, but she couldn't sacrifice more than a decade for another few months. And then what? Another jump? She would be an old woman and I still a young man. Her life would be almost done while mine wiled on.

She could not wait for me.

She insisted she would.

I insisted that I would not attempt to contact her again.

She spent two days angry with me. Really angry. I can't really blame her. I had come into her life again and declared my love. She had returned it with everything she had and now I was telling her that I would abandon her. But what else could I do? So I thought I would take a chance.

Igor had played me well. He had given all he had to give in an effort to win my trust but somehow I believe he knew it would come to this. My condition brought about separation. A death for everyone while everyone remains alive and everyone is hurt. The prospect of leaping away from this time was awful for me. The idea that others were going through the same thing made it all the worse. With the resources at his command, I imagined that Igor's research facility was my best chance at finding a cure.

I called Jeremy and Wyatt to discuss the idea with them. I did *not* use Igor's phone (in fact, I never used it for anything because I was suspicious that he was using it to track me). Jeremy thought that I was being foolish for giving up any time with Jennie on such a long chance. Wyatt, on the other hand, understood how hard each day had become and knew that my mind was made up. He didn't exactly encourage me, but he didn't discourage me either.

Still the focus of her anger, I approached Jennie with this idea.

She became more angry. How I could even think to trust him was beyond her understanding. Certainly I could relate to what she was saying, but I felt trapped by fate and circumstance. She felt hurt.

We reconciled.

What else could we do? The bond between us was not built but inherent. Natural. We could not fall *out* of love. It was impossible. No matter how far ahead I skipped, the people and the worlds I saw, Jennie would always be the one.

With leaden hearts we parted, I climbing once again into a car driven by Wil Lowenburg. She wept. I wept. We held each other for a long time. I tore a piece from each of our souls that day and created a wound that would never heal. As Wil pulled away from the curb, I sat twisted in the car and watched her as she watched me. She stood with her arms folded and her jaw set, determined to be finished with her crying. As we pulled around the corner and away from her, I straightened in my seat, dipped my face into my hands, and wept some more.

From the same author on Feedbacks

The Book of Revelations (2008)

When a psychiatrist discovers a way to see into people's past lives he becomes judge and jury. Seeking the advice of clergymen, he meets Rabbi Guetterman and discovers that, in his past life, he was of Adolf Hitler. This discovery sparks events that push the limits of society, test the bounds of faith, and put the rabbi in mortal danger. Because when the Jury is after you, there is no escape.

Zombies! Episode 4: The Sick and the Dead (2010)

The coming of the zombies to the world is not necessarily the coming of the apocalypse. Take a tour of the research facility where Dr. Denise Luco combats the zombie infection. Anthony Heron must continuously do battle with his own private demons while trying to keep the public ones at bay. And what's going on with Peter Ventura?

Life Broker (2010)

If you're like Mr. Davis, you're unsatisfied with your life. Of course, if you're like Mr. Davis, you've reached the end of your life and a none too happy ending it was. Ready for a new life, Mr. Davis now has the opportunity to make sure everything goes the way he wants it to go. And with Jimmy as his broker, everything's sure to turn out just right.

Zombies! Episode 1: Shawn of the Dead (2010)

THE coming of the zombies to the world is not necessarily the coming of the apocalypse. Shawn of the Dead is the first of a series of episodes that focuses on the more personal aspects of people as they face their regular lives against the backdrop of a zombie infection.

Zombies! Episode 2: Abby's Bad Day (2010)

The coming of the zombies to the world is not necessarily the coming of the apocalypse. Abby Benjamin is a typical working mom. But when one of the customers at the gym where she works falls ill, Abby gets a close up look at a completely different world, a world that is ever creeping into the lives of normal people. It is a very bad day.

Zombies! Episode 3: Love Bites (2010)

The coming of the zombies to the world is not necessarily the coming of the apocalypse. Relationships are hard enough without having to worry about the undead knocking on your door. Follow John Arrick, Shawn Rudd, and Denise Luco as they try to put their fears of the undead aside in order to grapple with the much more dangerous effects of romance.

Zombies! Episode 5: Sinners and Saints (2011)

Is the apocalypse a world wide event or is it something that happens privately to the individual? Zombies have become a part of society now, the truth of their existence common knowledge. And as policemen like Anthony Heron and Francis Culph must deal with the consequences of fighting them, others have embraced their existence in surprising ways. Their common ground? Lots and lots of zombies!

Zombies! Episode 6: Barriers Collapse (2011)

Is the apocalypse a world wide event or is it something that happens privately to the individual? The walls that separate the characters of *Zombies!* begin to collapse. Abby and Peter embark on a crusade to warn people of the threat of zombies while John Arrick discovers that his miraculous recovery from the zombie infection does not come without side effects.

Zombies! Episode 8: The Good, the Bad, and the Zombie (2011)

Is the apocalypse a world wide event or is it something that happens privately to the individual? It's Christmas. While Greg Smith is reunited with his estranged parents, Anthony Heron must battle his demons in order to find his way back to the family that is rapidly slipping away.

After an unprecedented phone call from his mother, Greg Smith and his wife agree to allow them into their lives despite a prior conflict. As they are resolving their issues, Smith must deal with the rapidly deteriorating Anthony Heron and a piece of intelligence that names all of the Zombie Rights Association officers and the locations of their safe houses.

When Naughton steps in to help Smith run the operation, they implement a plan to exterminate hundreds of zombies and take back

control of the city. But, of course, when an operation is spread out over six locations and involves dozens of people from all different branches of law enforcement, things are bound to go wrong.



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